

The Britain I Thought I Knew

An Austrian's Journey, 1969–2026

Wolfgang Geissler

"The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there."

— L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*

The country in my mind

I first saw Britain long before I lived there.

I saw it through the eyes of a Viennese boy born in 1943, a child of war who grew up among bomb craters, damaged apartment houses and blown bridges. Food, gas, electricity and fuel were in short supply. Vienna was divided among the four occupying powers. We lived in the Third District, in the British sector; across the Danube Canal lay the Second District and the Soviet sector. The world of *The Third Man* was not a film set to us. It was home.^[1]

Then came Sunday, 15 May 1955. My parents took me to the gardens of the Upper Belvedere, where we stood among thousands of elated Austrians. The State Treaty had just been signed in the Marble Hall, where Foreign Minister Leopold Figl proclaimed that Austria was free. He then stepped onto the balcony and held up the signed treaty before the crowd. I was eleven years old. We were too far away to see the signatures, but nobody needed to see them. The meaning of that moment was all around us.^[1]

That day furnished one of the fixed points of my life: a country can emerge from catastrophe, acknowledge that history has changed it and begin again. Austria's later account of itself was by no means spotless. For too long we preferred the comforting story that Austria had been merely Hitler's first victim to the more difficult truth that many Austrians had also been willing participants. But the experience of defeat, occupation and restored sovereignty taught my generation that national survival sometimes requires a break with illusion.

Britain occupied a very different place in my young imagination. To many Austrians it was still simply "England". We admired the victorious island that had resisted Hitler when almost all Europe had fallen. I pictured correctness, fairness and self-command: the English officer, the gentleman with bowler hat, rolled umbrella and *The Times* under his arm; the country gentleman in tweed; the composed English lady; detective stories, fine motor cars and a civilisation in which good manners seemed to be a form of moral discipline. It was an affectionate caricature, although I did not then know it was a caricature.

In 1959, through the Anglo-Austrian Society, I spent five weeks on exchange in Grimsby, including two weeks in the fifth form of the local grammar school. Grimsby was not the England of country-house novels, but that scarcely mattered. I loved the place and the people. The visit left me with an overpowering ambition: one day I would live in Britain. Ten years later, in 1969, I did.

That visit had an afterlife of its own. At Christmas 1960 my father gave me John Robert Seeley's *The Expansion of England*. On the flyleaf he wrote: "For a better understanding of the nature of what was once the greatest regulatory power for the Far East and West." The German word he chose was *Ordnungsmacht*: not merely a ruling power, but a force for order. Fifteen years after the war, order and

duty still possessed an almost moral radiance in Austria. Viewed from there, the British Empire could be imagined less as conquest than as civilisation under disciplined management.^[2]

Seeley famously wrote that Britain seemed to have conquered and peopled half the world “in a fit of absence of mind”. The sentence is witty enough to conceal a great deal. My father intended the book to deepen my admiration by adding history to romance. It did deepen my understanding, although not quite in the way either of us expected.

The burden of victory

The central question of this essay is not why I became disillusioned with Britain. That would be too simple, and rather ungrateful. I made my life there for forty years. My wife, Mary, is Scottish, and both our children were born and grew up in Scotland. After university, our daughter moved to Vienna, where she married; she and her husband have two daughters, and all four still live there. Our son studied pharmacy and remained in Scotland. He married a Viennese woman, and they have a daughter; all three still live in Scotland. Mary and I eventually moved to Vienna after our retirement. Britain gave me work, friendships, a family and an enduring second home. My question is more difficult: how did the country I admired so much become increasingly uncertain of what it was—and finally choose Brexit, an act that seemed to me both a rejection of Europe and an injury to itself?

Part of the answer, I believe, lies in the opposite lessons drawn from 1945. Britain had won the war, magnificently and at immense cost. Germany and Italy had been defeated; Austria had been annexed by Nazi Germany and emerged from the same catastrophe under occupation; France had endured defeat and occupation. These countries could not credibly pretend that the old order remained intact. They rebuilt political institutions, industries and national stories under pressure from reality. The phrase “rejuvenation by defeat” is severe but useful. Destruction forced renewal.

Britain’s victory brought freedom and honour, but also a burden. Much of its industry and its institutional framework remained intact; so did its global commitments and habits of command. The country had less incentive to admit that its relative position had altered fundamentally. It received more Marshall Aid than any other European country, but post-war economic weakness cannot honestly be explained by saying that the money was simply “squandered”. Historians and economists point instead to a tangle of causes: the cost of wartime debt and worldwide commitments, chronic balance-of-payments pressure, weak investment and management, poor industrial relations, insufficient competition, gaps in technical education and what economists call the “early-start” problem of the first industrial nation.^[3]

Continental economies, starting from devastation and lower levels of productivity, could replace destroyed equipment with modern plant and move workers from agriculture into expanding industry.

Britain had industrialised and urbanised much earlier. It was not standing still, but during the long post-war boom it was growing more slowly than several neighbours that had more room to catch up. Relative decline is not the same as absolute collapse. Yet to a country accustomed to pre-eminence, being overtaken can feel like collapse.

Austria found one response in its *Sozialpartnerschaft*—the organised negotiation of conflicting interests among labour, business and agriculture. It has often been criticised, sometimes deservedly, as opaque and resistant to change. Nevertheless, it reflected a post-war determination that the political hatred of the interwar years must not return. Britain had its own post-war settlement and a far deeper democratic tradition, but relations among government, employers and organised labour too often became a trial of strength. I began to wonder whether victory had preserved not only admirable institutions but also habits that made adaptation harder.^[4]

This is not a contest in which Austria is virtuous and Britain culpable. Austria rebuilt behind a convenient victim myth and did not thereby abolish prejudice or evade every economic mistake. Britain, meanwhile, created the National Health Service, expanded social security and managed much of its retreat from empire peacefully, though by no means all of it. My comparison is narrower: one country knew that defeat had ended an age; the other could still imagine that victory had preserved one.

Arrival: the picture acquires shadows

I arrived in 1969, one year after Enoch Powell's Birmingham speech had made immigration and race central to a new kind of national argument. The speech is widely remembered as "Rivers of Blood", although Powell himself quoted Virgil's image of the River Tiber foaming with blood. The reaction proved that he did not speak for all Britain: he was dismissed from the Shadow Cabinet, and many people condemned him. It also proved that the sentiments to which he appealed were real.^[5]

In Blackpool in 1970 I saw notices in the windows of bed-and-breakfast houses: "No dogs, no blacks, no Irish." I record the words in the order in which they lodged in my memory. Such signs were not an invention of later political correctness; discrimination in accommodation was among the practices that Parliament's Race Relations Acts were beginning, imperfectly, to confront.^[6]

The shock was not that Britain contained prejudice. Every society does. It was that prejudice sat so awkwardly beside the Britain of fairness and good manners that I had carried with me from Vienna. I had assumed, with the innocence of a post-war Austrian anxious to repudiate Nazism, that racism and antisemitism belonged particularly to our disgrace. In Britain I occasionally heard the hideous remark that Hitler "did not kill enough". I offer that as testimony to what I heard, not as a judgement on an entire

people. Nor can Austria claim moral superiority: antisemitism survived there after 1945, while our laws against Nazi activity did not magically remove attitudes from private life.^[7]

Northern Ireland came as a still greater shock. In 1968, while I was working as a trainee at Munich's Hotel Vier Jahreszeiten—a post I held from 1966 until 1969—peaceful civil-rights marches were being opposed by hard-line loyalists. On 30 November Ian Paisley and Ronald Bunting led supporters who occupied the centre of Armagh, forcing a sanctioned march of at least 5,000 civil-rights demonstrators to halt. Such confrontations did not by themselves cause the Troubles, but they helped turn demands over housing, voting, employment and policing into an increasingly violent sectarian conflict.

When I arrived in Britain the following year, I was bewildered to discover what appeared to me to be a civil war between Catholics and Protestants within the United Kingdom. That is how my unprepared eye first read it; it is not quite how I would describe it now. The Troubles were not a quarrel about doctrine. The religious labels marked opposed national and constitutional identities: unionist and loyalist, predominantly Protestant; nationalist and republican, predominantly Catholic. Nor did either community speak with one voice. Yet the fact remains that a supposedly settled and civilised Britain had allowed discrimination, fear and historical grievance to harden into violence.

The conflict did not stop at the Irish Sea. Scotland had its own, much older sectarian history, but the passions of Northern Ireland resonated there strongly, especially in the west. I shall never forget my first Orange march in Glasgow. I knew almost nothing about the Orange tradition and found the procession menacing. Until then, my knowledge of Protestantism in Britain scarcely extended beyond the English Reformation and the Church of England. I knew virtually nothing about the Church of Scotland, still less about the Presbyterian tradition.^[8]

Mary was and remains a Presbyterian; I was and remain a Catholic. In the language of the time, ours was called a “mixed marriage”. The delicacy lay not between us, but in the social and political meanings attached to those labels in Scotland—meanings I had not yet begun to understand.

In Scotland I also encountered anti-Catholic feeling more openly than I had expected. The history of sectarianism—bound up with religion, Irish migration, football, employment and neighbourhood—was real, though it varied greatly by place and was never the whole of Scottish life. Dave Allen, the brilliant Irish comedian, made the Catholic Church one of his richest sources of material. His comedy grew from his own strict Catholic upbringing and ranged much more widely than the Church. But to a continental Catholic newly arrived in Britain, unused to hearing Catholicism treated as comic material, the cumulative effect could feel relentless. That is a description of my reaction, not a demand that comedy should have spared my feelings.^[9]

Television complicated matters further. The BBC sitcom *Till Death Us Do Part* was built around Alf Garnett, an East End bigot whose rants against minorities, foreigners and social change were intended to expose prejudice through ridicule. Yet not every viewer received the satire as intended. Meanwhile, wartime films and comedies kept the German enemy permanently present in British popular memory. They commemorated courage and resistance, but they could also reduce the German to a stock figure: Nazi, bully, fool or “Kraut”. As an Austrian with the Germanic name Geissler, I learned that explaining the distinction between Austrian and German did not always help.^[9]

My first post in 1969 was as a control clerk at the Midland Hotel in Manchester. Almost opposite stood Tommy Ducks, a famous old pub that was sadly demolished in 1993.^[9]

After my Matura and military service, I studied tourism and hotel management at Klessheim near Salzburg. As a student—by then no longer averse to alcoholic beverages—I had become accustomed to discussing politics, religion and philosophy over a beer with like-minded friends. The habit flourished happily in Munich’s beer halls. I assumed that I could continue it in England.

One evening I was evidently overheard. A gentleman who seemed elderly to me—at twenty-five, almost everyone did—took me aside and lectured me.

“In English pubs we don’t discuss politics or religion.”

Somewhat taken aback, I asked, “And what may I discuss?”

“The weather,” he said, and went off to the lavatory.

Class was another language I had to learn. To the unstudied foreigner, many Britons initially sounded alike; to British ears, a few sentences could disclose region, schooling and presumed social rank. Before long I understood that accent was not merely pronunciation but a social passport. Modern research confirms that accent remains one of Britain’s most recognisable signals of social and ethnic background and can influence judgements of professional competence.^[10] I admired the British gift for laughing at the system. In the celebrated 1966 “Class Sketch” from *The Frost Report*, John Cleese, Ronnie Barker and Ronnie Corbett stood in descending order of height as representatives of the upper, middle and working classes, each literally looking up to or down on the others. The sketch remains perfect, but laughter did not abolish the hierarchy.

A “desirable alien”, 1973

Four years after my arrival, on 1 October 1973, the Home Office wrote to tell me that “the time limit and the conditions” attached to my leave to enter had been removed. I was no longer required to report changes of address or personal particulars to the police. “You are now free to remain permanently in the

United Kingdom,” the letter said, and I could take or change employment without permission from a government department.^[11]

When I went to the police station for the final time to be signed off, I asked the sergeant why the decision had come so quickly.

“Because we think you are a desirable alien,” he said, with a knowing smile.

He added that some people had lived in England for ten years and were still waiting.

DOCUMENT • 1 OCTOBER 1973

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HOME OFFICE
Lunar House Wellesley Road Croydon CR9 2BY

Telephone 01-686 0688

Please reply to The Under Secretary of State
Your reference

Our reference G 153593

Date 1 OCT 1973

Dear Mr. Gendler

I am writing to say that the time limit and the conditions attached to your leave to enter the United Kingdom have been removed. An appropriate endorsement has been placed in your passport which is enclosed together with your police registration certificate. You are no longer required to report changes of address or other particulars to the police and your police registration certificate has been endorsed to show that you are exempt from registration.

You are now free to remain permanently in the United Kingdom. You do not require permission from a Government Department to take or change employment in England, Wales or Scotland and you may engage in business or in a profession provided you comply with any general regulations governing the business or professional activity. In Northern Ireland however you will have to consult the Ministry of Health and Social Service if you are thinking of taking work there. If at any time you are thinking of going to live or work in the Isle of Man or one of the Channel Islands, you should first consult the Island's Immigration Authorities. If you leave the United Kingdom at any time you will normally be readmitted at any time within 2 years of your departure. It will be helpful if you can produce the enclosed passport or police registration certificate to the immigration officer on your return.

Yours sincerely

G. Sutton

The Home Office letter that removed the restrictions and confirmed: "You are now free to remain permanently in the United Kingdom." Author's personal archive.^[11]

The phrase amused me at the time. Looking back, I hear two truths within it. Britain had welcomed me with remarkable generosity; it had also done so through a vocabulary that divided outsiders into the desirable and, by implication, the undesirable. I had been fortunate. The letter freed me from restrictions, while the sergeant's joke reminded me that official welcome could still be expressed as classification.

One incident made the collision of categories unforgettable.

Turnberry, Easter 1974

By 1974 I had gained a NEBSS certificate in supervisory management at Westminster Technical College. British Transport Hotels, whose headquarters were then in St Pancras Chambers, posted me to the famous Turnberry Hotel in Ayrshire as an assistant manager. I was thirty. On Easter Sunday members of Glasgow's Jewish community came, as they often did, for afternoon tea. The Ailsa Lounge, looking across the golf course towards Ailsa Craig and the Isle of Arran, was particularly attractive.^[12]

I was duty manager and went to check the busy lounge. A guest waved me to his table and asked my name.

"Geissler," I said.

He pointed to a silver platter filled with triangular sandwiches. "What do you see?"

I felt foolish. The answer was plainly sandwiches, but plainly that was not the answer he required. He opened several of the triangles.

"So what do you see now?"

The penny dropped. Ham. Every sandwich on every tray was ham.

We hurriedly returned the trays to the kitchen, where I was greeted with a brouhaha. Some of the kitchen staff thought it amusing to play a joke on the Jews and on the "Kraut"—me—whom they had automatically associated with Nazism. These were not enlightened days, but even then it was not harmless fun. Hospitality begins with the obligation not to humiliate one's guests.

Afterwards I stepped into the Easter sunshine on the hotel terrace and found myself surrounded by a group of angry young Jewish men who accused me point-blank of being a Nazi. Their conclusion was wrong, but their anger did not arise from nowhere: Jewish guests had just been served a calculated insult in a hotel for which I was, at that moment, the responsible manager. My name and accent completed the picture they thought they saw.

Then an elderly Jewish lady joined us. She told the young men to be quiet and asked me, kindly, when I had been born.

“1943.”

“So how can he be a Nazi?” she asked them. “He was two years old when the war ended.”

The exchange ended. I have never forgotten it.

I do not present the two reactions as historically or morally equivalent. The kitchen’s antisemitic prank targeted people whose families and community lived in the shadow of extermination; the guests’ suspicion of me arose in response to that insult. What connected the reactions was the speed with which individuals disappeared into categories. To the kitchen, they were “the Jews” and I was “the Kraut”. To the young men, I was a Germanic name and therefore a Nazi. The elderly lady alone asked for a fact.

Only while revisiting this memory in 2026 did I discover a remarkable coincidence. Easter Sunday in 1974 fell on 14 April, which was also the final day of Passover in the Jewish diaspora. Ham is never kosher; observant Jews would also have avoided ordinary leavened bread during Passover. I have no reason to believe the kitchen staff knew the Jewish calendar—I certainly did not—and the guests need not all have been observant. We should not invent an intention for which there is no evidence. Still, the coincidence sharpens, in retrospect, the cruelty of what was done.^[12]

A country that stopped

The same decade revealed a Britain struggling not only with identity but with governability. Edward Heath took the country into the European Economic Community on 1 January 1973, after the Commons had approved the principle of entry by 356 votes to 244 in October 1971.^[13] To me, British membership seemed a natural recognition that the country’s future lay with its neighbours. To many Britons it was an economic arrangement made by politicians, never an emotional homecoming. That difference would matter later.

Then came the Three-Day Week. From the beginning of January 1974, commercial users of electricity were generally restricted to three specified consecutive days. Television closed early; shops, offices and hotels adjusted; the ordinary week acquired an atmosphere of emergency. The immediate cause was the miners’ industrial action and the resulting threat to coal supplies, made worse by the wider energy and inflation crisis. I experienced it not as an academic dispute over incomes policy but as the extraordinary spectacle of an advanced industrial country rationing its working life.^[14]

The 1970s are too often remembered as an unbroken succession of strikes, shortages and national decline. Britain also changed for the better. Social deference weakened; racial and sex discrimination were increasingly challenged; culture was energetic and irreverent. But politics acquired a rhythm of

confrontation. Governments appeared to alternate between controlling unions and yielding to them, between nationalisation and privatisation, while long-term investment waited upon the next reversal.

By the winter of 1978–79, widespread industrial action had become the “Winter of Discontent”. On Wednesday, 28 March 1979, Margaret Thatcher moved a motion of no confidence in James Callaghan’s Labour Government. It passed by 311 votes to 310 at 10.19 in the evening.^[15] I went to bed knowing that something fundamental had ended.

I did not, as I once wrote, wake the following morning “in the world of Margaret Thatcher”. That is a good dramatic sentence but bad history. The vote required an election. Thatcher won it on 3 May and became Prime Minister on 4 May. Yet the instinct behind my memory remains true: the one-vote defeat opened the door to a political transformation whose effects are still with Britain.

Thatcher: cure and fracture

Margaret Thatcher understood that the old settlement had become exhausted. That was the source of both her strength and her danger. She was not merely a politician administering decline; she meant to reverse it. Inflation had to be controlled. Management could not be permanently unable to manage. Some nationalised industries were inefficient, some trade-union practices indefensible, and competition had too often been weak. Her governments widened share and home ownership, opened markets and helped turn a troubled economy towards services and new technologies.

Those achievements deserve to be acknowledged, especially by someone as critical of her as I was and remain. But the cure carried costs that were treated too readily as proof of resolve. Manufacturing communities suffered mass unemployment and deindustrialisation; regional inequality deepened; financial power became more concentrated in the South East. The sale of council houses benefited many tenants, but the failure to replace the homes sold helped create a social-housing shortage that later generations inherited. Income inequality rose sharply during the 1980s.^[16]

What disturbed me most was not an economic formula but a change in the moral weather. The language of solidarity gave way to the language of winners, losers and individual acquisition. The new mood soon acquired its own figures. “Essex Man” became shorthand for the upwardly mobile, home-owning, often self-employed working-class voter who had turned Conservative. Harry Enfield supplied the grotesque comic version: Loadsamoney, his swaggering plasterer who brandished a wad of banknotes as proof of his worth. The broader phrase “Thatcher’s children” was later applied to a generation whose attitudes had been formed in her Britain. These were caricatures, but caricatures work only when they recognise something real. This did not begin with Thatcher, nor did every Briton adopt it. Britain remained capable of immense public generosity. Yet politics became more willing to regard social damage as collateral in a necessary battle.^[16]

The Falklands victory in 1982 restored confidence after years of humiliation. It also strengthened a patriotic story in which national renewal came through standing alone and defeating a foreign enemy. Again, the point is not that remembrance of the war or pride in British courage caused Brexit. History does not operate so mechanically. But the wartime grammar—this island, its exceptional destiny, its enemies across the water—remained unusually available to politicians and newspapers when Europe later became the argument.

Thatcher herself helped create the Single Market, yet her later battles with the European Community encouraged Conservatives to treat Europe as the place where British sovereignty was forever being stolen. By the time she left Downing Street in 1990, forced out by her own party, Britain was economically changed and politically more divided. She had answered the question of power. She had not answered the question of belonging.

Major and Blair: roads not taken

John Major followed her. I liked him. This is an unfashionable admission, but memoir should not pretend to feelings one did not have. He seemed decent, moderate and less interested in turning every disagreement into a test of ideological purity. His premiership was wounded by Black Wednesday, party scandal and civil war over Europe. Yet the economy recovered and entered a long expansion. More importantly, Major and the Irish Taoiseach Albert Reynolds issued the Downing Street Declaration in 1993, establishing principles of consent and peaceful democratic participation that helped prepare the ground for the Good Friday Agreement.^[17]

Tony Blair arrived in 1997 with an optimism I had not felt in British politics for years. Although I had never previously voted Labour, I regarded him as the best Prime Minister of my four decades in Britain. The judgement is personal and requires qualification. His governments introduced the national minimum wage, increased spending on health and education, incorporated the European Convention on Human Rights into domestic law, created devolved institutions in Scotland and Wales, and completed important parts of the Northern Ireland peace process. Operational independence for the Bank of England was announced by his Chancellor, Gordon Brown, and should be credited accordingly.^[18]

For a time Britain appeared comfortable with being modern, European and outward-looking without ceasing to be British. That mattered deeply to an immigrant who had come to the country out of admiration rather than necessity. Blair's easy manner was mocked as presentation, sometimes justly, but national self-confidence is not trivial when it releases rather than excludes.

Iraq destroyed the promise. The 2003 invasion, undertaken alongside George W. Bush on a case for weapons of mass destruction that did not withstand scrutiny, damaged trust in government and

overshadowed Blair's domestic achievements. The Chilcot Inquiry later found that the diplomatic options had not been exhausted and that the circumstances in which the legal basis for military action was decided were far from satisfactory.^[19] A leader I had admired came to embody, for many, the very manipulation and remoteness that his victory had seemed to end.

Major and Blair remain important to my story because neither fits a simple decline. They show roads Britain could take: patient negotiation in Northern Ireland; constitutional reform; a civic national confidence able to share sovereignty. The Good Friday Agreement, in particular, demonstrated that sovereignty could be made safer by becoming less absolute. Brexit would put that settlement under strain precisely because it revived hard questions of borders and identity that European integration had helped to soften.

Europe becomes the enemy

After our retirement, Mary and I moved to Vienna in 2009, but one does not leave a country after forty years simply by changing one's address. With family in both Vienna and Scotland, I continued to follow British politics from a position that was both inside and outside. I was close enough to feel the consequences, distant enough to notice how peculiar some arguments had become.

The financial crash of 2008, followed by years of austerity, weakened trust and sharpened regional grievances. Rapid immigration brought change to some communities, not always matched by adequate planning for housing, schools or health services. Many voters had sound reasons to believe that decisions were being made elsewhere by people insulated from the result. It would be contemptuous to reduce the 2016 Leave vote to ignorance or racism.

Nor, however, can the campaign be understood without the long cultivation of Europe as a convenient culprit. Sections of the British press had spent decades presenting Brussels as meddling, alien and faintly absurd. Research suggests that sustained tabloid campaigns did affect Eurosceptic attitudes, while studies of the referendum find that economic conditions, education, age, identity, immigration and distrust of politics all played a part.^[20] No single explanation is sufficient. That is precisely why slogans were so powerful: "Take Back Control" allowed different grievances to share one apparently simple remedy.

Brexit drew upon the burden of victory. It promised that Britain could recover power by removing constraints, as though interdependence were a humiliation rather than the condition of modern life. The European Union is cumbersome, bureaucratic and often exasperating; I know this as an Austrian as well as a European. But membership was not foreign occupation. It was a system of negotiated rules in which Britain possessed influence, allies, opt-outs and a vote.

The 2016 referendum produced a democratic instruction to leave. It did not settle what leaving meant. The narrow majority was converted into a struggle for an ever “purer” Brexit, and compromise became betrayal. Parliament, courts, civil servants, experts and even inconvenient economic facts could be denounced as enemies of the people’s will. A decision advertised as the restoration of parliamentary sovereignty made sober parliamentary deliberation almost impossible.

By 2026 the economic argument can no longer be dismissed as mere pessimism. The independent Office for Budget Responsibility still assumes that, in the long run, UK imports and exports will each be 15 per cent lower than if Britain had remained in the EU, reducing potential productivity by 4 per cent.^[21] Forecasts are not holy writ, and not every British difficulty since 2016 was caused by Brexit: the pandemic, war, energy prices and longstanding low investment all matter. But new trade barriers with the country’s largest neighbouring market were an act of policy, not an act of nature.

The pandemic then exposed weaknesses that were again larger than any one government or ideology. The UK Covid-19 Inquiry found that Britain had been poorly prepared and that political decision-making was marred by groupthink, with action too often “too little, too late”.^[22] I mention Covid only because it reinforced the theme: the rhetoric of exceptional national capacity repeatedly collided with the practical need for competent institutions, trusted expertise and cooperation.

A cautious return, 2026

In May 2025 the United Kingdom and the European Union agreed a “Common Understanding” intended to deepen cooperation in security, trade, energy, food standards and opportunities for young people. It was not a return to membership, the Single Market or the customs union. It was a practical admission that neighbours cannot escape geography.^[23]

Andy Burnham became Prime Minister on 20 July 2026. His government has spoken of strengthening relations with the EU but has so far retained the red lines against rejoining the Single Market or customs union.^[24] It is much too early to know whether this will become a substantial rapprochement or merely warmer language. A month in office is not a historical era, and this essay should not become a weekly political column.

Still, the change of tone is worth recording. Repair usually begins not with a grand confession but with the abandonment of magical thinking. Britain need not declare Brexit a national sin in order to reduce its damage. It needs to ask, transaction by transaction and institution by institution, what cooperation serves the people who live there. Closer relations with Europe would not erase the referendum. They would acknowledge experience.

The Britain I know

What, then, became of the Britain I thought I knew?

It never existed—not in the complete form imagined by the boy in Vienna. The gentleman with the umbrella, the instinctive fairness, the calm island standing alone: these were fragments assembled into an ideal. On arrival I found a real country, and reality is less tidy. It contained courtesy and cruelty, confidence and insecurity, astonishing tolerance and stubborn prejudice. It could welcome an Austrian and call him a Kraut; create the NHS and neglect industrial towns; make peace in Northern Ireland and reopen the politics of the border; look naturally towards Europe and insist upon being separate from it.

Yet the imagined Britain was not simply false. I met the fairness I had admired. Sometimes it appeared in institutions, sometimes in friendship, and sometimes in one elderly Jewish lady who interrupted an angry crowd and asked a stranger for the decisive fact. The best of Britain lay not in never making a mistake but in the capacity to correct one without theatricality.

My argument, after all these pages, is therefore this. Britain's post-war difficulty arose partly from the burden of having won: victory preserved a national story of exceptional independence after the material foundations of that independence had changed. Economic disappointment, unresolved questions of empire and identity, social conflict and a political culture increasingly willing to blame Europe gradually widened the distance between story and circumstance. Brexit was not caused by one newspaper, one politician or one prejudice. It was the moment when that distance became policy.

Austria's experience taught me that defeat can compel renewal, but Britain should not need defeat in order to renew itself. It already possesses what renewal requires: democratic institutions, humour, argument, practical intelligence and the ability—when it chooses—to prefer evidence to category. The first step is not to recover a vanished greatness. It is to stop confusing an idealised past with history.

I came to Britain because of a youthful picture. I stayed because the country became part of my life. I write critically about Britain, not because I have ceased to care, but because I still do.

Vienna, 24 August 2026

Sources and notes

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