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Britain in Flux: "The Bull's Head" Revisited

13 Thurloe Place
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Dear Mr. Nolte,

"If you get people striking over the length of time a girl spends in the toilet I do not wonder that some other nations are beginning to wonder what is happening." Thus spoke the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Callaghan, solemnly and perhaps a trifle desperately at a public meeting in Wales early in September. According to a newspaper comment, "He did not know what to blame the most, the irresponsibility of the workpeople or the incompetence or ham-handedness of managements." And yet, in the same address Mr. Callaghan related his growing optimism about the future, especially with the statement that a continuation of current Government policies would eliminate by December 1966 the £800 million balance of payments deficit of 1964 (no matter that many Conservative Party supporters are now decrying the sum as a "myth"). It is almost enough to compel the use of that dire word, dichotomy. The bewildering point is that all the above remarks and comments may at the same time be true -- or not.

The foregoing paragraph owes something to a layman's idea of how a journalist might begin a story. More significantly, it indicates the confused and contradictory nature of events here. And, most important, one may hope it conveys a bit of the flavor of the substantial changes which have taken place in Britain over the past two decades, particularly during the last several years. To someone accustomed to the English life of fifteen years ago and returning for a lengthy visit, the impression of change is overwhelming at first. Doubts and consequent movement back toward more balanced perspective only come after weeks have gone by. Even in the sheltered confines of the local public house, The Bull's Head, rather subtle differences in social attitudes and behavior are sensed in the otherwise familiar environment.

Now it is scarcely news to most people that the English scene in certain ways has been transformed as a result of cumulative adjustments to the post-war world. Turn on the television and you hear from announcers a multiplicity of regional and class accents, as well as see a range of

programs, the airing of which would have been virtually unthinkable on the radio of fifteen or even ten years ago. Working class wages and living standards have changed almost as dramatically in the same period. In the London streets and parks numerous young men and women increasingly seem bent on eradicating surface differences between the sexes, while inclining to explore without much inhibition the less manifest distinctions. Deal with an English automobile salesman, and you are likely to find a quick, breezy spieler hardly distinguishable in manner from his American counterpart. Supermarkets, often on a paradoxically small scale, are dotted about town, "Wimpy Bars" (i.e., hamburger joints) seem to be becoming as prevalent as tea shops in the central part of the city, and the Hilton Hotel has considerable and growing company as it juts into the London skyline. Not only do the papers make constant reference to the new universities and colleges which seem to be springing up all over Britain, there are also many stories about young people deliberately turning their backs on "Oxbridge" in favor of the new places. Such instances of change, and of course this is only a rough minimal sampling of what could be a lengthy list, are readily apparent to anyone who is doing more than passing through London.

If this is such common knowledge, why begin by stressing the obvious? Partly because these examples, while superficial at times, may give the atmosphere of changes which go beyond them. Partly to set up something of a straw man, because various comments below will go in the direction of diminishing the significance of a number of these points. But mainly for one reason which is unabashedly didactic in character: this is simply to try to counter the tendency of educated Americans to believe they already know everything about England -- a foible shared to a lesser degree by the English in regard to us. Especially in the executive branch of our Government, a middle-grade civil servant charged with following United Kingdom affairs who tries to make a novel observation based on new data is quite likely to be overruled by his superiors, on the grounds that such a judgment simply does not conform to the England they know. Yet the same officials are equally likely to accept with docility even the most exotic opinions about some underdeveloped country with an incomparably less complicated social, political and economic structure. In short, there seems good reason to believe many of us have failed to absorb the evidence of how much the life and temper of the British have altered. This, despite all the written material available on the subject and the amount of reading accomplished at home -- the old theme of "two peoples divided by a common language."

Perhaps most striking is the high percentage of people in England who have little or no attachment to or even knowledge of pre-war Britain; insofar as they have the latter it is largely displayed in terms of rejection. To some extent the numbers of Commonwealth immigrants centered in London may account for and distort this impression. It is a little disconcerting to enter a neighborhood hardware store behind an Indian lady with filagree gold earrings, caste mark and flowing sari, and wait for her to be served, only to discover that she is the shop assistant. There can be no doubt that the London buses would come to a dead halt if all the West Indian employees were to quit in a body. And one shudders to think of what would happen to the National Health Service if there suddenly were no Commonwealth medical personnel available. It should be added that the influx has not been confined to colored people: many hotels, for example, appear to have imported from the Iberian Peninsula the majority of their maids, few of whom speak much English. However, despite the labor shortage in evidence on every hand -- whether partially artificial or not -- Government spokesmen may have good grounds in calling for a respite on immigration in order to try to assimilate those who are already here. Whether the actual proposals on this score are the right ones is another question; in any case, they seem slated for some kind of emendation before final action. Whatever the nature of such action, it should take account of the great contributions made to present-day England by the many talented individuals who have immigrated over the past two decades and more. Incidentally, I feel a personal debt to those foreigners who have substantially raised the quality of London dining.

An incomparably larger though less obvious group which seems to feel little sense of identity with traditional Britain is formed by many of the generation born since the start of World War II -- a truism virtually global in application, but nonetheless true for that. However, the sense of mingled rejection and detachment among young people appears sharper here than in most industrialized countries. This opinion, by the way, does not depend on such flamboyant exercises as the "mods" and "rockers" tearing up Brighton and other coastal resorts; these activities seem no more or less meaningful than comparable American student brawls at Fort Lauderdale and elsewhere.

Finally, it is not surprising that large numbers of middle-aged working class people, remembering the salaries and conditions prevailing through the forties, should have few regrets about what they left behind. With their ready acceptance of past economic and social change, and their constant pressure for further advances in wages and terms of employment, these people at times appear to have the

potential for becoming what would pass for an almost revolutionary force in a society devoted to understatement. On the other hand, most of this energy is dissipated in the narrow cause of individual material benefits. If any general reform proposed by the Government can be interpreted by such people as either threatening their current gains or helping some other group at their expense, heels are dug in with great rapidity. As a result, a large element in the population seems to veer between radical and conservative postures or, more frequently, seems to adopt an attitude which partakes of both. In response, any Government would be tempted to head for the center ground and stick there.

On that contradictory note assertions about change begin to fall away. For the England so much more familiar to Americans is still very much in evidence, and often more influential than evident. The land of castles, cathedrals, clubs and pubs seems generally quite intact. Englishmen still jealously guard their privacy, their individuality and their choice of companions (and surely no one would wish it otherwise). Public-school, prestige-university graduates hold positions and exert influence all out of proportion to their numbers, and sometimes to their talents, even though the "old school tie" as a passport is becoming increasingly frayed at the edges. Commemorative ceremonies are taking place this year on every hand, despite the majority of people seemingly too busy or bored to care. Class war as a concept may be as old hat as the empire, but class lines have only been blurred, not obliterated by any means; although a man can make it from the bottom to the top of the ladder on brainpower alone, the first steps remain extremely hard to accomplish. Cleaning women, when obtainable, will lavish loving care on the front stoop and any brass knobs that show, while blithely ignoring all the venerable dirt in the kitchen. Housewives still must shop each day, a practice which may at least have the merit of preventing "elevenses" turning into American-style coffee hours devoted to comparing childrens' antics and, one suspects, husbands' deficiencies. To comfort the latter, it can be reported that England resoundingly remains a man's world.

In other words, it seems entirely possible that a well-to-do tourist who scorned the "telly" might see little besides the England he expected to see. Equally, a foreign government official here for a few days of consultation presumably could be whisked from one Whitehall office to another, dine at various clubs, sleep at his embassy or a first-class hotel, and -- perhaps aside from a stray suspicious accent at the Foreign Office -- perceive no substantial difference between this year and 1955, or even 1935, except for all the new buildings and costume changes. This

stable environment is fading, but only very slowly. Any friendly observer from abroad must hope that the gradual pace is sufficient to encourage an elimination of stultifying anachronisms and the retention of so much that is both traditional and good.

Thus, the older and the newer England -- the really "new Britain" insists on hiding around some unknown corner -- exist together and are intermingled to a baffling extent. And both are being examined and questioned at a furious rate by the communications media, academic researchers and politicians. There seem to be platoons of poll-takers and statisticians engaged in turning England inside out to a degree surpassed only in the United States. The general public plays its part in this new sport with an increasingly irreverent attitude both toward its institutions and practices, and toward the whole business of avid self-examination; perhaps it senses that the latter may only lead to an inferiority complex.

Virtually everything is in question and has been for at least three years: labor problems, management behavior, the shortcomings of the "11-plus" examination, the curricula of universities, defense expenditures, foreign policies; almost every item one would care to name. The role of Etonians has been under such intensive scrutiny that it's a wonder the Old Harrovians haven't gone on strike just to get some attention. Probably a good deal of the astonishing vitality of the arts in Britain in the last few years -- what many observers call a renaissance -- derives from this spirit of questioning, freedom and experimentation. Whatever the reasons, the activity in this last sphere makes London possibly the most stimulating place to live in the western world. Sadly, though, there are those who believe the tide is beginning to recede as experimenting reaches the limits and becomes a search for novelty for its own sake.

Befuddled by the range of answers my fairly simple and general questions were eliciting, I sought guidance from a very knowledgeable English acquaintance of earlier years. His cheerful retort was: "Well, that's all to the good; until recently we British have all been thinking the same way for forty years." But one wonders how much frustration will develop from the process. How long can a nation indulge in self-analysis without coming to agreement about its goals or, if they are settled upon, without agreement about the means of attaining them? In undergoing a roughly similar experience the United States had the mingled bane and blessing of obvious global power as a cushion between it and bitter disillusionment; Britain does not have that buffer.

For it is difficult to discover much of a result from all the recent excited questioning and exhortation among those who lead or shape opinion in this country. An inquiry is launched and an approach to a consensus is made -- and the report promptly is put on the shelf. A slight adjustment is made in the British Railways system of handling parcels between London stations, and thousands of pieces pile up on the King's Cross platform entailing three-week delays in delivery. Workers will go on strike in one plant over the quality of the beverage emerging from tea-wagons, while in another they strike because they don't have tea-wagons. Arthur Koestler, in a Sunday Times interview last month, explained as a naturalized British subject how much he had come to identify with and care about his adopted land in these words: "Certain things in this country exasperate one, drive one really quite mad . . . here in the Brompton Road, now, I do not know for how many months, they have been repairing something at a snail's pace. That drives me mad. I feel that this country cannot compete with the world." Yet -- again the paradox -- a case can be made that the record on exports on the whole has been a good one.

Meanwhile, life in this city moves at a contradictorily brisk but pleasant tempo. The prosperity and the sense of well-being are actual, not superficial -- no matter what they cost in inflation and inefficiency. If anyone thinks that the most serious international payments crisis in years must have the British hanging on the ropes, he will find it impossible to confirm his thesis by talking with the average Londoner. Despite all the admonitions by Government spokesmen and editorials in the better newspapers, most of the public appears generally rather bored by what it regards as just the latest of a long series of payments crises since the war. The majority tentative feeling seems to be that the relatively good life has been achieved in the teeth of external problems, and that this difficulty may be surmounted like the others. Such sentiment is intensified rather than diminished by the avidity with which the press devours fragmentary trade and payments data, preaching doom one week and confidence the next. A certain mild amusement is derived from the concept of the "gnomes of Zurich".

One highly-placed civil servant, taking a somewhat bland view of the question, notes that an adjustment in living standards of a half of one percent should bring matters nicely back on the tracks. A very well-informed journalist points out that the British industrial machine is about at the stage where that of France was when the boom began across the Channel. Doubtless there are many other true and pleasing statements that could be made in these circumstances. But the hard fact remains that some £1 billion have to be repaid over the next 3 to 5 years.

Down at "The Bull's Head" the dart players seemingly haven't changed too much in fifteen years, though they are dressed better and have the money to buy more pints. Few are inclined to discuss much more than the worst television shows, some of them imported from the United States. Yet, over in one corner, a couple will confess that they miss the greater comradeship of past years and the readiness of friends to lend a helping hand then; as a follow up, they will indicate that the "I'm all right, Jack" spirit has made deep inroads, and not only among the working people. In another corner, a woman in London Transport uniform condemns in outraged tones the temerity of her supervisor, who apparently asked her to call him "sir." "Oo knighted 'im, I wants to know?", she shrills. Tempers are often a bit short, an egalitarian assertiveness is more evident, and there seems to be increasing recognition that material prosperity of itself is more likely to lead to further wage demands than to general feelings of satisfaction.

It is still largely under the surface, but many people of all classes seem to be feeling a nagging sense of national uncertainty and inadequacy. After all the bold talk about technology and the new Britain in the last two or three years there is little to show for it on the positive side except some general prescriptions. The recent preoccupation with change in all areas of life has led more to stalemate than to actual changes. Now the credit squeeze is beginning to be felt, the likelihood of deflation is being seen, and the Labour Government appears to be emerging from the financial doldrums with at least a tentative determination to take some of the steps which many of their supporters hoped for last October; to be effective, a large bloc of voters would have to be hurt by such measures. Were it not for the delicately balanced political situation and the English talent for avoiding conclusive answers to knotty problems -- in part a capacity understandably acquired after the fearful experience of the first World War -- one might think that current positions could not be maintained very much longer.

In sum, Britain has fundamentally changed and is changing, but remains curiously untouched in many of the most basic ways. Contradictions and inconsistencies are at every hand. There is placidity with underlying nervous tension; assertive self-satisfaction can shift into a display of an anxious feeling of inferiority. The sense of movement continues, although many people find it less strong than last year or the year before. However, it is still not clear what direction that movement is taking, especially in the area of international affairs. And full account has to be taken of the possibility that business at the same old stand will go on much as before, even though such

an outcome might have to assume the absence of external stimuli, or at least the absence of the right kind of stimulus. Indeed, with the wrong kind of external influences at work (particularly a widespread and excessive nationalism on the Continent), it is conceivable that events in Britain might tend in a quite unexpected direction. It is far too early to look for cumulative frustrations here taking an ugly turn -- and they certainly may never do so -- but it is well to be aware of that possibility over the longer term.

Concluding, as we began, with Mr. Callaghan's speech in Wales, his final words were quoted as being "We need a national sense of urgency." I daresay the average Englishman at this juncture might well reply "about what?" or just "so what?" It does not appear good enough to call for increased productivity and exports -- calls which the British have been hearing for years. It seems more true to say that this country badly needs a "national sense of purpose" before it feels, or can organize, the required urgency.

Sincerely yours,

D. G. Henderson

Donald G. Henderson

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