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Introduction

THE YEAR 1990 in retrospect seems eventful, exciting and at times dangerous. In international relations Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in August, prompting the Americans to lead the alliance of democratic peoples that expelled him in the following February. More important was the unexpected end to the Cold War, involving the dramatic and ongoing disintegration of the USSR, with Romanian and Czechoslovakian communist regimes overthrown in December. Here ended the long international deadlock that had constrained British diplomacy since 1945. In 1990 Thatcher, the twentieth-century prime minister most overtly resolute in resisting Soviet communism, lost office after her three successive administrations had transformed the terms of British domestic debate. In 1990 the European Union (EU) was at the height of its quest for political and economic union, and in October the United Kingdom (UK) joined the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM). The riots on 31 March against Thatcher's 'community charge' (popularly known as the 'poll tax' and designed to reform the local-government rating system) showed that the government had seriously misjudged public attitudes and fuelled the shift in backbench attitudes that within months drove her from office.

This book aims to serve many purposes. Some will want to use it as a reference work to look up particular points from time to time, and the index will help on that. Others will want to brief themselves on specific areas of British life, and so will turn to one of the twelve chapters, each of which is concerned with one broad area. Those who want to read the entire book may wish to read the final chapter first, because in summarizing and drawing together the book as a whole it clarifies its subject matter and overall approach. I hope that all readers will use the book critically for formulating their own ideas and not feel compelled to agree with its author. The book's first five chapters discuss political aspects of the thirty-year period 1990–2020. Then, in 2019–20 there occurred another cluster of unexpected events, once more with unpredictable consequences: a worldwide pandemic together with the less global disruptions associated with the UK's departure from the EU on 31 January 2020. Each chapter has its own chronology, reflecting the fact that in any society there can be no single chronology, only a set of interlinked chronologies. Every chapter is divided into the sections identified on the contents page; every section is divided into subsections by

three asterisks (as below): these broadly reflect transitions within the section's overall argument.

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Significant change in most areas is gradual and continuous, and most strikingly so in the history of the environment, family life, population change, education, intellectual life, recreation and culture—all discussed in chapters 6–12. We end with the pandemic, an event whose significance cannot yet be assessed. It highlighted the continuous interaction between political and social change; G. M. Trevelyan likened the latter to 'an underground river, obeying its own laws or those of economic change' whereas political events 'move on the surface of life' and are 'the outcome rather than the cause of social change'.[1] In discussing the conduct of British politicians, the wider context within which they work cannot be ignored, nor should the term 'political' be too narrowly defined. At any social level, everybody can find themselves in 'political' situations, though these are not always recognized as such. They abound not just in places identified as political, but also throughout life, whether within the home, the workplace, the nation and the world.

Why then begin, in chapter 1, with politics narrowly defined? The political theorist H. J. Laski thought it 'a grave error to assume that men in general are, at least actively and continuously, political creatures'. He thought that the most important context of their lives 'is, for the majority . . . a private context'[2]—a view rejected by totalitarian regimes. It is for the reader's convenience, however, that we begin with political history. Chapter 1 comes closer to narrative than any other, if only because major political events—changes of government, cabinet reshuffles and suchlike—are widely seen as signposts that lend shape to events. The growth of social history, in many respects welcome, may sometimes risk neglecting the politicians' potential life-and-death role, whereas politicians can profoundly affect the lives of the millions who take no interest in the subject. So chapter 1 requires accompaniment (in chapters 2 and 3) by what might be called the social history of politics: insights into the institutions and conventions within which politicians operate. Chapter 2 discusses how such institutions as monarchy, the executive, parliament and local government evolved during these years. Chapter 3 moves more firmly towards social history by describing the complex set of institutions that have slowly evolved to link the politicians to the public: party machines, general elections, pressure groups and the media in their political role. Chapters 2 and 3 inevitably overlap with chapter 1 but are concerned with the diverse and often distinctive chronologies of particular institutions. Within these the politicians operated, sometimes seeking significantly to change them. Whereas the politician's stock in trade is to find ways of avoiding physical force, chapter 4 is concerned with the structures and mechanisms that make up the politician's last resort: with the coercive structures and conventions that interacted with the UK's legal and policing structures. Chapter 5 is concerned with those overseas areas where force seems ultimately to be required beyond national boundaries.

In the book's later chapters (6–12) we focus more closely on the UK's evolution after 1990 in less political areas, beginning with the environment in chapter 6. Chapter 7 discusses the history of UK social class and ethnic patterns. In discussing trends in family life, chapter 8 follows the life sequence from childhood through the changed attitudes to sexuality during adolescence, with due attention to significant changes in the situation of the young and of women. Chapter 9 focuses on the closely related topics of health, welfare, old age and death—areas where both state and voluntary organizations play important roles. Chapters 10 and 11 move into the history of ideas, highlighting schools, universities, leisure and culture. Chapter 12 discusses economic change, the short- and long-term impact of the so-called credit crunch and the subsequent recession whose consequences have yet to work their way through. The final chapter, 'Conclusions', asks how far these years witnessed national decline while drawing together key points from the entire book. As the editors of the symposium *Rethinking British Decline* wrote in 2000, 'the debate about decline . . . has generated some of the most exciting intellectual argument in modern Britain'.[3]

The year 2020 differs from 1990 in that we do not yet know what the pandemic's long-term consequences and significance will be. The year 1990 introduces the twilight zone between past and present whose inhabitants seem to speak and think like us, but whose contrasts with us are elusive. The period is amply documented, but documents accumulated by hard-pressed administrators, journalists and others cry out for interpretation. The experience of these years can be distilled into 'history' only when many people have had the time and energy to collect, select and reflect. There is a particular need for comment from those in the UK for whom 'England' can no longer be deployed synonymously with 'United Kingdom'. All four of its components—England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—still have enough in common to be discussed together, but their distinctiveness is becoming highlighted, and it is not yet clear whether break-up is their ultimate destination, or whether influences such as Blairite devolution or even the need for collective self-defence will ultimately hold them together. Where the UK's component nations diverge, they'll be discussed separately but, in their many shared social, cultural and economic features, they'll be discussed together.

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Some will think it rash to attempt historical study so soon after the event. Why not wait till all the relevant paperwork becomes accessible, together with abundant written and recorded reminiscence? Yet abundant relevant material is already accumulating in libraries, on the internet and elsewhere; interest shown in it sooner rather than later will ensure that more of it is not only preserved but even enhanced through timely interviews and enhanced preservation. One major accessible source is, however, already available: the press. It is often said that the press accumulates 'the first draft of history'. Journalists in a competitive and therefore relatively open society attract diverse and resourceful talent, and in the thirty years

under discussion several of them became historians of the highest calibre. British newspapers competitively and collectively provide an invaluable source, with a strong sanction for accuracy and range: any newspaper that failed to reflect the tastes and interests of its readers would be driven out of business.

Newspapers and periodicals have long ceased to focus primarily on politics, and to create a broader narrative from them is to exploit the rich variety of human experience that a democratic society can now offer. More than this, they constitute a guide or index to a wide range of topics and sources that earlier newspapers overlooked, so that a rounded picture of society as a whole can be conveyed, embracing the political process of course, but also highlighting the formal and informal structures that individuals create for themselves. These ensure that the individual entrepreneur and the volunteer receive due prominence—the family, school, laboratory, hospital, media, shop, factory and sports ground—together with battlefields courageously reported: dying children, mass graves, hospitals shelled and wildernesses created. Sometimes the simplest of scenes make the most impact: the old man dragging his pramload of belongings walking out of the city to he knew not where, the appalled mother distraught at the fact that her beloved son has gone to a city centre now being bombed. Study in such areas shifts the emphasis from central government to locality and from there to the individual: from the ideas and aims of politicians and administrators towards a more fruitful destination—the thoughts, structures and aspirations that spontaneously grow up within a free society.

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