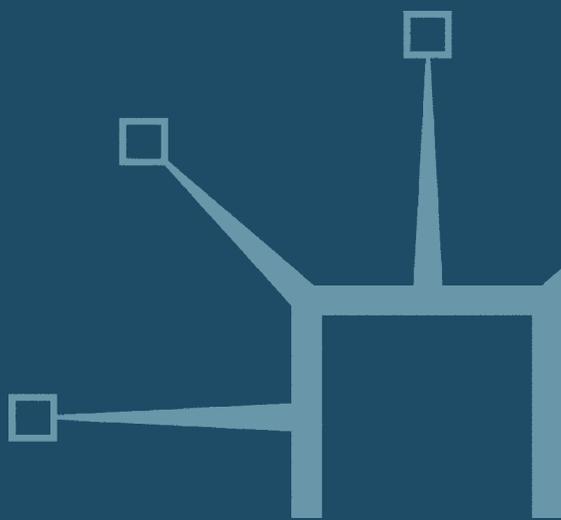


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Governing Post-War Britain

The Paradoxes of Progress, 1951–1973

Glen O'Hara



Governing Post-War Britain

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The Paradoxes of Progress, 1951–1973

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*This book is dedicated to my PhD supervisor,
Professor Kathleen Burk*

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1

Introduction: Progress and its Paradoxes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Part I

Ideas from 'the Outside'

2

The Use and Abuse of Foreign Archetypes in British Economic Policy

The 'imaginative geography' of post-war economic ideology

In February 1961, Thomas Balogh, the Oxford economist – and *eminence grise* of Labour Party economic thought – submitted a paper to that party's economic policy committee. In it he summed up many of the perceived dangers, and many of the anxieties, inherent in Britain's so-called 'golden age' of economic growth:

Unless we can increase our rate of growth ... we shall have to stifle something. The Commonwealth has not been conspicuous in granting us ... favourable markets ... How are we to compensate ourselves then, in order to promote growth, for the advantages enjoyed both by the United States and the Common Market industrialists in their own protected markets? The traditional 'free imports' argument ... doesn't answer that question. If we can't [compensate ourselves] then I suggest we shan't enjoy cheap food. We shall not be able to pay for it ... [because] the day is near, if it has not already been passed, when current output per head in Germany and France are higher than in England. This is what growth does.¹

Balogh's fears illustrate many interwoven themes, but chief among them were the problems of a commodity-importing country in a world where the USA and European Economic Community (EEC) subsidised and protected their own farmers and producers, who then enjoyed huge markets in which to sell their goods. The overriding impression was of a loss of confidence in Britain's economic strength and future, summed up in the uncomfortable idea that 'current output per head in Germany and France' might be 'higher than in England [*sic*]'. For a man who was later to become Prime Minister Harold Wilson's special adviser on the economy, this is an extremely illuminating list of fears.² Balogh was hardly alone in this, for despite Britain's post-war economic advance the period was so marked by an overwhelming fear of national economic decline that historians have given the complex

a name: 'declinism'.³ Encouraged by international league tables that showed Britain's economic growth rate lagging behind those of other developed nations, these indicators now became a popular and indeed pervasive part of national discourse.⁴ Foreigners, *The Economist* noted in 1963, 'say that Britain is badly governed, badly managed, badly educated and badly behaved – and the striking thing is that more Britons are saying the same, more stridently still'.⁵ And if Britain was 'failing', it was all the more natural to look elsewhere for salvation.

This chapter will attempt to deconstruct and analyse some of these British views of the European economies so vividly brought to life by Balogh's memorandum – but which often turned out to be entirely inaccurate. Many theorists have covered the way in which citizens' *own* nations are perceived, and numerous examples could be given in the context of modern British history. Tony Kushner, Sonya Rose, Paul Ward and Richard Weight have in their different ways considered the colliding and complementary roles of class, gender, region, nation and ethnicity in forming the amalgam of twentieth-century 'Britishness'.⁶ To take just three narrower but varied examples of more specialist work in an extremely crowded field, Martin Francis has analysed the emotional pressures that Conservative Prime Ministers were under in the 1950s, a period in which 'being British' apparently meant deploying self-restraint, reticence and cool detachment. Max Jones has analysed the role of the British 'hero' in shaping modern Britons' self-image, while Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska has shown how the shock of apparent 'physical deterioration' helped to privilege and reinforce the 'perfect' British male body.⁷ These histories owe a great deal, at least implicitly, to the Marxist thinker Benedict Anderson. '[The nation] is an imagined political community', he has argued, 'because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communities'.⁸ But if that is true of the way Britain was constructed by its inhabitants, it should be even more pronounced in the way Britons 'imagined' other nations.

'Imagining', rather than truly understanding, is probably the appropriate term. Looking back on the period, other countries' faster growth can often be explained within a 'catch-up and convergence' framework. Since France, for instance, started off so far behind Britain, it was far easier for her to 'catch up' through employing cheap labour, importing other countries' technology and applying it in industries where vested interests were not yet strong enough to complain.⁹ Sure enough, Britons were nearly a third richer than the French in 1950, but about 8 per cent poorer in the mid-1970s, a gap that then began to close again.¹⁰ Though this is not to pretend that everything about the British economy was perfect, it does at least set the constant emphasis on *rates* of economic growth, rather than actual per capita income, in context. So perverse does the national soul-bearing now appear that some authors have now condemned Britons' tendency to see 'what was wrong

rather than what was right ... failures relative to other nations rather than successes'.¹¹ Given the questionable evidential basis upon which 'declinism' rested, economic *ideas* and *opinions* become an even more important part of British history.

Transnational policy constructs and influences were not an entirely novel twentieth-century phenomenon. Malcolm and Tom Crook have recently shown how French experts such as Tocqueville were called in to give evidence to the House of Commons on franchise reform in the nineteenth century.¹² Such 'French' precedents were often denigrated in a political culture that saw Britain as an exemplar of ordered progress as compared to continentals. 'Europeans', indeed, were sometimes portrayed in the early Victorian period at least as if they laboured under a chaotic political culture that was impractical and 'too clever by half'. Bernard Porter's work on those ideas has been available for many years, though, as he himself pointed out, the condescension did not last unchallenged, as Britain's relative economic position at least appeared to come under strain in the late nineteenth century.¹³ As early as 1886 the Royal Commission on the Depression of Trade and Industry concluded that 'our position as the chief manufacturing nation of the world is not so undisputed as formerly'.¹⁴ In domestic politics, E.P. Hennock's 1987 book on New Liberalism's debts to Germany was and is a fascinating study of Edwardian reformers' later and generally positive views of that country.¹⁵

The late twentieth century remains, even so, highly underexplored as to the influence of foreign models – especially in light of the fact that they became more pervasive, increasingly influential and apparently applicable in just those years. The creation of transnational bodies such as the OEEC and ECOSOC only transmitted these concepts ever more quickly.¹⁶ In the place of a really rigorous transnational study there is only a series of individual and episodic analyses, pieces of a mosaic perhaps, but parts of a wider whole that provide only clues to the whole picture.¹⁷ Views of the USA have been more thoroughly treated, although even a more general and thematic treatment is required. Lawrence Black has covered fears of 'Americanization' in post-war British society, though his central concerns have been cultural, rather than economic and social: similar themes are exhaustively covered, though for the inter-war period, by Chris Waters and his contributors in a 2007 special issue of *Cultural and Social History*.¹⁸

There has been no consistent or comprehensive treatment of Britons' views of Europe in the second half of the twentieth century: the traces are everywhere, and therefore nowhere in particular. Though such a task necessarily lies outside the remit of any one academic work, however long, this chapter will draw on two case-studies, of France and the Soviet Union, to begin to open up a relatively underexplored area of Britain's relations with the continent: a set of concerns that are not only underwritten, but are also vital if we are to understand British *self*-perceptions. Such an examination might help historians unpick the ways in which the transmission of ideas

after 1945 was *different* to that of the former periods explored by the new historians of 'networks', as well as more traditional analyses such as those of Porter and Hennock. The theme might also illustrate how policy research can be self-defeating, for the 'lessons' drawn often appeared to collide with reality inside the British public sphere. For all these reasons, Anderson's framework is adopted here to ask the question: how exactly were other nations' economies 'imagined' between the early 1950s and the early 1970s?

The pull of Europe and the relative silence of the West German example

The first context for these concepts must be Britons' increasing anxiety over the EEC's economic experiment with methods that were at once both neo-liberal and *dirigiste*. The creation of this huge market indeed stood behind Balogh's portrait of a small, cramped and inefficient economy. These fears, and the consequent reflections of Britons' self-image in the framework of others' successes, were widely shared in Whitehall. A mixed group of both permanent civil servants and temporary advisers told the Cabinet in 1965:

The size of the population and economy of the United Kingdom is already proving and will increasingly prove to be an insufficient base either for the maintenance of an expanding economy and standard of life at home or for the discharge of our commitments and responsibilities overseas.¹⁹

The contemporary emphasis on the large corporation as the engine of economic growth, and more generally on gigantism in economic and social life as a whole, also explains the views of the more explicitly pro-European officials such as Sir Con O'Neill, head of the UK delegation in Brussels between 1963 and 1965.²⁰ As he wrote privately in 1964: 'there will for the rest of the century be three main centres of effective power: the Soviet Union, the United States and Western Europe'.²¹

The Federal Republic of Germany was eventually to become the new Europe's economic powerhouse. But this was not the model to which Britons turned, a counterintuitive development that requires a great deal of explanation, especially in the light of quick German growth. Until the currency revaluation of June 1948, and especially in the winter of 1946–47, Germany's fate appeared to amount to near-starvation and hyperinflation in those black markets that still operated. But thereafter, German reconversion and progress were rapid.²² Moreover, they were mounted in a much more libertarian manner than in France, guided by two of the most apparently successful Finance ministers of their era: Ludwig Erhard, between 1949 and 1963, and Karl Schiller, between 1965 and 1972. The former, in particular, was determined to decentralise, decartelise and to some extent Americanise the West German economy.²³

Erhard's views were summarised in an English edition of his *Prosperity through Competition* in 1958. 'Success has proved me right', he argued: 'German economic policy has produced a steadily increasing output from which everyone has benefited uninterruptedly.' He proceeded to outline the reasons for 'success': lower taxes; political commitment to following economic rules, rather than *dirigisme*; low inflation.²⁴ Some Conservatives, especially relatively free-market thinkers, were immensely attracted to 'German' ideas. Social insurance payments (rather than incentive-destroying income taxes), for instance, might force employers to economise on their use of 'surplus' labour.²⁵ Lower taxes on profits, and more rewards for managers, were thought in these quarters to explain German growth.²⁶

Deep-seated fears and prejudices about German society prevented some decision-makers from imagining that Britain might have anything to learn from the Federal Republic. Macmillan himself, on a visit to the country as Minister of Housing in the early 1950s, commented that 'we could not have been received with greater courtesy': but also that 'they [the Germans] like being "told". They like a leader ... It is our job to see that Dr Jekyll remains in possession.'²⁷ Left-wing opposition to German rearmament can partly be seen in this light.²⁸ Still, popular or mass animus towards 'warlike' Germans, and still less elite dislike, was *not* the main reason for Britons' greater attentiveness to their French neighbours: anti-German feelings seemed stronger, if anything, in the 1970s than they did in the 1950s and 1960s.²⁹ The *Daily Mirror* ran a highly flattering piece on Germany in 1962 which argued that the citizens of the Federal Republic worked hard, did not strike, had 'spotless' homes and good schools. 'Everywhere I go I can see what they can tell US', wrote the *Mirror's* correspondent: 'but I keep wondering what we can tell THEM.'³⁰

The relative silence of the German example in Britain can be explained more acutely by reference to three specific elements, rather than to general views of Germany. The first concerns timing, for it took many years for the British authorities to believe that West Germany would emerge quickly from the ruins of war to outstrip her economy. For many years before full convertibility in 1958, and even though the German currency had been on a sound footing, Erhard and his colleagues continued to fear that 'they would find themselves ... having access to dollars only through sterling'.³¹ German attempts to announce unilateral convertibility for the Deutschmark, transforming it from a 'soft' to a 'hard' currency, were rebuffed even when they envisaged convertibility at the same time as sterling. Long-running efforts to reform the European Payments Union in a manner that would make the Deutschmark more important were also resisted.³² The Germans appeared at international meetings to be supplicants, rather than confident negotiators in their own right, even after their country's basic industries were acknowledged to be some of the most efficient in the world.³³

This helped, for a long while, to disguise the changes taking place at industrial level. The head of Britain's civil service, Sir Edward Bridges, visited

Germany to advise on security and intelligence in 1956. While there, he promoted the British system of investment allowances for industry, and advised that Britain's recent part-privatisation of steel might provide a model for the German state to further divest itself of controls in industry.³⁴ It took two large upward revaluations of the Deutschmark, while the system of fixed exchange rates lasted, to make that currency obviously the most powerful in Europe.³⁵ By that time, it was the British who were negotiating for help and advice in Bonn.³⁶

There were, second, diplomatic factors: the basic community of interest that connected Britain with the Federal Republic, especially during the years in which de Gaulle ruled France. West Germany was keen to see the UK enter the EEC, partly because they perceived this as a way of protecting Europe from French isolationism and American withdrawal. Bonn's views, and appeal, might to some extent be taken for granted.³⁷ French dominance of the Community's decision-making fascinated and appalled many in London, though it was undoubtedly impressive. To this extent interest in France can in fact be seen as part of a struggle with de Gaulle, whose 'certain *idée de la France*' was asserting that country's leadership of the continent just as British Prime Ministers were finding it impossible to influence the Superpowers.³⁸

Macmillan may well have worried in private, as John Ramsden has shown, about 'a boastful, powerful "Empire of Charlemagne" – now under French but later bound to come under German control'.³⁹ But, for many years to come, the 'Western Europe[an]' bloc that O'Neill foresaw was firmly under French control. An allied reason for downgrading German success concerned the cost Britain and the USA therefore bore for keeping their armed forces in West Germany. The latter was perceived in London and Washington as an increasingly rich country that could look after its own defence, and was living off others' largesse. An ever more rancorous diplomatic wrangle took place over so-called West German 'offsets' that would assist the UK and USA with these costs.⁴⁰

Third, and most fundamentally, it was in fact Erhard's methods themselves that posed the most deep-seated problems for British policy-makers. They perceived themselves, for one thing, to be more 'advanced' and more 'Keynesian' than the Germans. In a political environment increasingly obsessed with economic growth, his emphasis on stability – and his fear of inflation – seemed less relevant. The German argument that they had succeeded in building huge budget surpluses, wrote the economist Graham Hallett in 1973, were 'meaningless' in the context of macroeconomic management. In fact, totalitarianism and inter-war hyperinflation had helped to create a German economic elite who 'were distinctly pre-Keynesian', and who had been refusing to use budgetary policy to manage the economy as a whole.⁴¹ This helped to make the German policy experiment seem less relevant across the political spectrum, even in relatively conservative circles. When Bridges brought back

a series of papers on budgeting from his visit to the German Finance Ministry, the official to whom they were given deprecated the example. 'I hardly think that wholesale translation is justified,' he wrote.⁴²

Hallett and most other British economists perceived German success to lie on the supply-side, in 'almost idyllic' industrial relations secured by local consultation and participation, and in infrastructure improvements.⁴³ Even as German and British economic experience began to move closer together in the 1960s, and both societies experienced inflation and labour shortages, recurrent contacts in 1965 and 1966 between the Labour government's Department of Economic Affairs and the West German Ministry of Economics focused on just these questions. But these cultural, legal and physical reforms were not instantly replicable at the national level. Despite continuous talk of setting up a standing body of Anglo-German officials to work on these questions, little appears to have been done.⁴⁴

The federal West German system was even thought in Whitehall to be holding back Bonn's efforts at reorganisation and technical re-equipment, especially on the scientific front. The appointment of a new Minister for Scientific Research in September 1965 was the occasion for a highly critical Treasury and Ministry of Technology memorandum criticising German science for 'traditionalism', 'structural rigidity', 'decentralization and excessive academic freedom' and 'unwieldy complexity'.⁴⁵ French macroeconomic experiments, on the other hand, of an 'advanced' Keynesian type and mounted by a centralised and dynamic state, certainly might be applicable in the medium term. Peculiarly German and French experiences, as well as the 'European' context, explain the difference in London's attention and receptiveness.

The French exemplar in British economic policy

It was therefore France, and not West Germany, that quickly became a model of a 'semi-planned' or 'middle way' economy, in which central government exercised many more controls than the German state, but withdrew from the arena after setting agreed rules and targets. In 1964 Robert Hall, until recently Chief Economic Adviser in London, even wrote a foreword to a book on French economic methods written by Pierre Bauchet, Director of Studies at the *Ecole Nationale*. Hall enthused that:

[The French] have tackled the problem of how to reconcile freedom of choice for the consumer and the business man with centralised direction, and the no less difficult problem of how to reconcile consultation with capital and labour with Parliamentary democracy.⁴⁶

This was a wider issue than just the renewal of enthusiasm for 'planning' which marked British politics in the early 1960s, and which is well known to

historians.⁴⁷ There was in fact admiration for France across what the mathematician and Labour MP Jeremy Bray, while critiquing free-market thought in his 1970 book *Decision in Government*, termed 'the role of government in the whole range of economic decision making ... and not just medium term planning'.⁴⁸ This attitude can be found explicitly in the 1963 Fabian Society report *The Administrators*, which helped to frame Labour's reforming civil service agenda after 1964; and also in the Fulton Report on the Civil Service which eventually emerged under Wilson.⁴⁹ Such was the bureaucracy's power to embody 'Frenchness' in economic and social policy that the model's critics, as well as its friends, focused on the elite's discreet powers as its main peculiar element.⁵⁰

France's extraordinary growth rate during the 1950s and 1960s, so different from the country's experience of the 1920s and 1930s, was the main reason for the contemporary enthusiasm.⁵¹ Here again there is an interesting comparison to be made with the West German experience – and another reason the French experience remained more influential. Although the Federal Republic's 'social market' miracle of the 1950s had indeed delivered the most rapid growth in the OECD, French growth speeded up in a comparable manner during the late 1950s and early 1960s, and indeed became faster than Germany's for the 1960s as a whole.⁵² The Glasgow University economist Thomas Wilson noted with amusement in 1964 how 'not so long ago France was regarded as the sick country of Western Europe, staggering from one inflation and currency crisis to another'. Given the surprise of France's resurgence, he thought this 'one-sided' view had now gone to the other extreme.⁵³

French economic policies looked at the time like an attractive mirror image of Britain's 'stop-go' crises, during which Britain's economy moved forwards only to be checked by a balance of payments deficit and a crisis deflation.⁵⁴ To aid France's recovery from occupation, and speed up her economic modernisation, a planning commissariat had been set up in 1946 under Jean Monnet. This supervised the work of so-called 'vertical modernisation commissions', which brought government officials, trade unionists and employers together to negotiate the medium-term balance of each sector of the economy.⁵⁵

Pierre Massé, at this point the commissariat's head, proselytised for this model on a visit to Britain during the spring of 1962. It was not the first time he had offered policy advice in London. As Assistant Director of the nationalised French electricity company EDF he had advised the British Treasury on the rate of return that governments should expect in that industry.⁵⁶ The experience helped Massé establish his credentials within Whitehall, and that of the French exemplar more generally. As Bray was later to argue, it was not only the agreement of targets, but wider methods of accounting, management and scientific advice, that were objectively more successful in France than Britain.

In late April 1962 Massé furthermore contributed to a joint National Institute and Political and Economic Planning (PEP) conference on 'economic planning in France'. This conference was attended by key figures from industry including Sir Robert Shone from the Iron and Steel Board, Wilfred Beckerman, at this point at the Organisation for European Economic Co-Operation (OEEC) in Paris, and Sir Hugh Beaver from the FBI.⁵⁷ Beaver was at this stage chairing an employers' inquiry into 'planning', and was part of a powerful group of 'revisionist' businessmen who were willing to contemplate *détente* with the unions and government in return for an end to stop-go.⁵⁸ Massé thus had a receptive audience. In his speech to this conference, he emphasised how small his commissariat was, its non-departmental nature, its advisory role and its partnership, or 'association', with the Ministry of Finance. Even right-wing newspapers praised his achievements as 'sensible and empirical'.⁵⁹

One of the attractions of French success was that, for an admired 'planning' system, it in fact seemed so unplanned. As one RAND corporation analyst argued: 'there has been a great deal of *dirigisme*, but not much *planisme*'.⁶⁰ Increasing the amount of shared information in the system was supposed to get over the co-ordination problems that blighted unorganised free-market variants of capitalism. The French economist François Perroux put it thus in his guide to the Fourth Plan: 'such an economy is essentially *informed* ... firms and individuals are not simply acting in juxtaposition, each without any knowledge of the rest apart from what can be learnt from price changes'.⁶¹ Another influential book was John and Anne-Marie Hackett's *Economic Planning in France*, published in 1963. There they reflected on the 'small role played by coercion', and promoted government plans as an 'optimistic' guide to action.⁶² When Prime Minister Harold Macmillan read the PEP pamphlet based on the conference, he forwarded it to Selwyn Lloyd, his Chancellor, with a covering note that read 'there is no doubt in my mind that something of this kind might meet the case ... I think we could devise something on the French basis which could be Conservative or "Middle Way" planning'.⁶³ Macmillan had since the 1930s tried to identify himself with 'capitalist planning' and 'middle way' solutions that combined the market with state *dirigisme*.⁶⁴

The French influence can be seen quite explicitly across a wide spectrum of government policies and ideas in the early 1960s. The Treasury's preparatory paper for the expansionist 'new direction' of economic policy implemented in 1961–62 was entirely open as to the influence of Massé's visit and the PEP–National Institute conference.⁶⁵ The creation of a more powerful Ministry of Science under Douglas Hogg (who had renounced his title as Viscount Hailsham to sit in the House of Commons) was also explicitly modelled on the French example.⁶⁶ The Labour Party's economic advisers, for instance the Cambridge economist Robert Neild, praised the example as the party prepared to take power in the run-up to the 1964 election.⁶⁷

Once Labour was in power, Balogh continued to hold that the 'confidence trick' of simply announcing higher economic expectations would accelerate growth in and of itself, and that the greater efficiency experienced in periods of faster growth would allow an increase in exports.⁶⁸ Wilson's enthusiasm for 'technological co-operation' as a means of negotiating with France was imagined in terms of the technological breakthroughs the two powers might make together.⁶⁹ The debate in Cabinet as to whether to publish the 1965 National Plan itself was centred around the question of whether Britain possessed a sophisticated enough planning system, on the French model, to justify such a departure.⁷⁰

Alec Cairncross, head of the Treasury's Economic Section, though interested in the *idea* of government 'modernisation', had never had much time for the French example as such. Although he remained interested in the French example of what *might* be done in terms of more direction – as witnessed by the fact that he visited the Paris Commissariat along with another 'mixed' team in October 1961 – Cairncross made clear in a number of pro-planning forums that he was less than impressed by its constant role as exemplar.⁷¹ As he later argued:

It was based on a French model which was completely misunderstood. Nobody ever went over to France to ask what the French did. If you went over, you found that the plan was prepared in the French Treasury, not in some separate thing called a commissariat, and you found that the French would not claim to have accelerated growth, they simply had what they regarded as a high and satisfactory rate of growth.⁷²

Such reflections are a testament both to the ubiquity of the French model, and to the problems of implementing it in a quite different policy space. But Cairncross' more jejune view became more influential in the later 1960s, as the failure of Labour's National Plan to meet its targets became increasingly apparent.⁷³ France's economic performance also began to look much less impressive than it had done in the early 1960s, a fact that helps explain a gradual lessening of interest in that country's policies. The industrial relations chaos of 1968 was one indicator that trouble lay ahead. And although France continued to outstrip Britain in terms of economic growth during the late 1960s and early 1970s, the inflation rates of the two countries were rather similar, at least until the chronic British inflation of the mid-1970s.⁷⁴ French price rises were above average for the developed world, a fact that was well publicised in the UK.⁷⁵

The Cold War and the Soviet economic 'lead'

France was not the only archetype for British decision-makers. Harold Wilson was one leading politician who also appealed to the Soviet example, not

only in his famous 'white heat' address at the 1963 Scarborough party conference, but also in less celebrated set-piece speeches. For instance, at Labour's Blackpool conference in 1959 he argued that:

The challenge is going to come from Russia. The challenge is not going to come from the United States. The challenge is not going to come from West Germany nor from France. The challenge is going to come from those countries who, however wrong they may be – and I think they are wrong in many fundamental respects – nevertheless are at long last being able to reap the material fruits of economic planning and of public ownership.⁷⁶

'Are we really to counter the Soviet industrial developments', he asked in the same year, 'with an economic system the higher manifestations of which are the take overbid and a Stock Exchange behaving like a casino run mad?'⁷⁷

It was not just Wilson who believed the Soviet Union posed a formidable economic challenge to Britain. Many among the policy-making community thought that the Soviet Union's advantages, like those of the EEC, with France at its heart, included the scale and scope of a large market and a strong government able to force through the modernisation of her infrastructure. Here the second of the great contexts of post-war British public policy – the Cold War, and the nuclear stalemate at its heart – have to be taken into account. As Peter Hennessy has commented, that 'shadow' was in the background of every Cabinet discussion of the entire period.⁷⁸

The early, and perhaps 'hottest', phase of the Cold War had actually been a period of deep doubt among Sovietologists about that regime's ability to prosper. Harry Schwartz's *Russia's Soviet Economy*, published in London in 1951, was one good example of this early Cold War view. 'Throughout the Soviet régime', he showed, 'the diet of consumers has consisted primarily of bread and cereals; they have had little in the way of clothing, and much of that has been of rather shoddy quality.' The Stanford economist Naum Jasny was similarly sceptical.⁷⁹ As the 1950s wore on, and Russian economic performance began to seem more praiseworthy than this, perceptions gradually changed. This created an intellectual opening, on both left and right, for commentators impressed with Soviet results: Jasny was bitterly attacked from all sides as prejudiced, extreme and biased.⁸⁰ The Marxist economist Maurice Dobb launched a particularly vicious attack on Jasny's book, which tried to show that Soviet agricultural, industrial and price data did not rationally fit together. At its present growth rate, Dobb argued, 'the USSR will surpass Western Europe in *per capita* output of basic products like iron and steel, coal and electricity before the end of the present decade ... [she] might "catch up and overtake" the standards of Western Europe much sooner than most people expect'.⁸¹

Outside the hard left, a 'convergence thesis' on Soviet growth gradually gained traction. 'Convergence' theorists held that East and West were

supposed to be coming together towards managed economies and planned societies as large organisations and pressure groups sought the diminution of risk. The American economist J.K. Galbraith, for instance, in his famous 1958 book *The Affluent Society*, was a particularly influential proponent of this thesis.⁸² Instead, bureaucracies would increasingly govern both types of society, competing with different means, perhaps, but ultimately for the same end: economic growth and prosperity. This was a similar argument to that of the Foreign Office Planning Group in 1964: 'in simple terms the Stalin/Dulles concept of a life and death struggle for mastery between Communism and Capitalism has given way to a situation in which the two main protagonists ... use their ideologies as instruments for the prosecution of the national interests rather than as the inspiration for a crusade'.⁸³

Nikita Khrushchev's reforms as First Secretary of the Communist Party between 1953 and 1964 put greater emphasis on prices and territorial decentralisation, though the latter process was later reversed as confusing and chaotic. This impressed some observers. One international conference on the Eastern bloc was told in 1960 that 'we have recently been witnessing changes in the economic structure of Soviet Russia ... which have revived the economists' interest in the nature and merits of centralisation or decentralisation of the economic system'.⁸⁴ The academic and consultant Margaret Miller argued in a 1965 pamphlet – *The Rise of the Russian Consumer* – that 'one of the most important tasks of the new planning to introduce, in a form acceptable to a state-controlled economy, are the twin stimuli of profit and competition which provide the driving force for economic activity in free-enterprise societies'. It was a remarkable conclusion for a piece published by that usually free-market think tank, the Institute of Economic Affairs.⁸⁵

Moscow was also allowing spending on welfare provision to increase, a development which American Sovietologists had argued was impossible given the Russians' emphasis on heavy industry. It even appeared for a while that industrial centralisation and the application of science to social life might actually make Soviet society better, rather than reducing citizens' quality of life. Even *The Economist*, also hardly a bastion of statist thinking, noted in June 1963 that 'there are at last real signs that in the vast new pre-fabricated blocks of apartments springing up on the edge of every big town the Russians have transformed nearly half of their previous appalling urban housing problem, and may thereby be achieving something of a world breakthrough in speed of construction'.⁸⁶ All of this ran exactly against Western expectations. Churchill, for instance, had told Eisenhower in 1954 that 'whatever raw materials or equipment is available to the Russians' would probably be poured into armaments.⁸⁷ The apparently new dispensation in Moscow shocked many into a second look.

There had always been a number of committed Marxists, for instance J.D. Bernal, the British crystallographer and one of the leading lights in the Association of Scientific Workers, who had admired Russian science and

technology. The 1969 edition of his *Science in Society* still argued that 'the ... communist state ... gives to all the peoples of the Soviet Union something to work for that satisfies not only their material needs, but also their sense of justice and human dignity'.⁸⁸ But in the late 1950s and early 1960s Russian communism was attractive across a much wider political front, for it was supposed to possess some especially 'ordered', rational secret to the application of science, perhaps rooted in a puritanical sense of their systems' deferment of enjoyment and higher investment. Michael Shanks, in his famous 1961 polemic *The Stagnant Society*, praised 'the new Sparta of the East', forceful, concerted and purposeful, and compared the capitalist world to a decadent, declining Athens. It was perhaps more of a shock for Western elites to discover that the Soviets could build and deploy high technology than it was for Bernal and the far left, who were much more used to the idea.⁸⁹

The idea of more 'effort' and 'application', even as the Soviets placed more emphasis on the quality of life, appealed to politicians across Britain's political spectrum. The search was certainly not isolated to the centre-left of British politics. Conservative Party policy committees pondered the Eastern example throughout the 1960s. Russian science was described therein as 'outstanding ... but uneven', putting Britain's 'amateurs' to the test in a world of increasing scale and scope.⁹⁰ Viscount Hailsham, in the early 1960s Minister for Science and entrusted by Macmillan with a diplomatic mission to Moscow in 1963, compared Britain's science spending unfavourably with that of the USSR in his 1963 book *Science and Politics*.⁹¹ Some of this is unsurprising, for ministers had been briefed in the Cabinet that the Soviet Seven Year Plan of 1958 was, 'whatever the validity of the propagandist claims ... formidable'. 'It would be unwise to denigrate the Plan', the Foreign Office planning staff informed Conservative Secretaries of State: 'we should regard a 3% p.a. increase of industrial labour productivity (*half* the projected Russian 6%) over a seven year period as very satisfactory'.⁹²

But Conservatives, increasingly worried in the early 1960s that Britain was becoming a sated and low-effort society, were as attracted to some of the methods as they were to the results. Aubrey Jones, a Conservative MP and later head of Labour's national board for prices and incomes, summed up the Conservatives' effort in this field in 1962:

One cannot engage effectively in the struggle with the Soviet Union for competitive co-existence without treating science and technology on something approaching Soviet terms ... In a struggle for competitive co-existence, in a struggle for the capture of the leadership of non-committed countries, both parties are forced to try and emulate each other. The Soviet Union is increasingly being forced to emulate the West in giving better treatment to the consumer ... a similar thing is true of the West. If we are to take science and technology more seriously, we will have to go some way towards adopting the Soviet planned effort.⁹³

On the left, and with rather different collectivist and technocratic overtones, Tony Benn confided to his diary in 1968 that 'communism is going to score heavily over capitalism with the advent of computers because the Communists got centralised control early but didn't know what to do with it ... [but] computers now gave them a tool for management'.⁹⁴ This confluence of right- and left-wing views, both agreeing that the communists were doing *something* right, was an important element in creating an Eastern archetype.

Soviet techniques spread to Britain through international organisations. During the 1920s, the Russian Stanislav Strumilin had been one of the first economists to work on the idea of accounting for the gains of education and training. As deputy chairman of Gosplan after the war, and head of the central statistical administration, he had tried to evolve models for fitting educational provision and spending to wider planned targets.⁹⁵ His thought was extremely influential within UNESCO, the educational arm of the UN, and was constantly referred to at UNESCO and academic conferences that included John Vaizey, the leading British expert on international education at this time. Vaizey went on, in his widely read 1962 Penguin Special on education, to advocate a Soviet-style planning system for education. Labour would indeed set up a planning bureau within that department, though ministers struggled to determine the amount of power it should have.⁹⁶

The influence of Soviet methods extended to that country's 1959 education reforms, which were supposed to bring technical, vocational and academic higher education more closely together through the use of part-time, evening and correspondence classes. The Robbins Report on higher education, published in 1963 and fundamental in the expansion of Britain's universities, specifically praised the Soviet system after a 12-day visit to the USSR in June 1962. The committee believed the Soviet system to be as specialised and selective as the British. The lines on graphs of future manpower demand and supply, however, seemed less favourable to the British than the Soviets – another benefit to the gigantism and faith in central direction that had been so important in the French example.⁹⁷ Part of the reason for adopting Robbins at all, and emphasising the need to match future student numbers to the need for educated graduates, was precisely this Soviet case. As one Cabinet Office planner put it to the Ministry of Education in 1962, 'future trends indicate that unless our higher education facilities are greatly expanded, the United Kingdom by 1972 is likely to produce proportionally fewer graduates than most European countries and only about one-quarter the proportion of the USSR'.⁹⁸

Slowly, the Soviet challenge – like the French – seemed to wane. Even during the Sputnik era, American planners believed that rapid industrialisation in the East would be followed by a period of relative stagnation as the supply of cheap labour and easy economies of scale ran dry.⁹⁹ A Foreign Office analysis of the third programme presented to the twenty-first party congress, which looked ahead to the mid-1960s, doubted that the hoped-for progress

was possible at the quick rate experienced in the 1950s. The Foreign Office planners echoed Jasny by concluding that 'the unreality of a programme which assumes an equal rate of growth in agriculture and industry, and an undiminishing rate of growth of industry, is clearly demonstrated by Soviet experience'.¹⁰⁰ It was a scepticism that helps to explain why the Soviet influence was confined to science policy, education and to the general rhetoric of puritanical endeavour.

In retrospect, Soviet economic performance peaked in the 1950s. From then on, growth could only slow as the gains of territorial advance, the re-allocation of labour from the land, heavy industrial investment and transport integration tailed off.¹⁰¹ Contemporary American estimates put the USSR's growth rate at 6 per cent in the 1950s, 3.7 per cent in the 1970s and only 2 per cent in the early 1980s. Khrushchev's 'reforms' also became less attractive, since they involved few changes in the way in which enterprises and managers actually made decisions, and the Soviet leader had to reverse some of them while still in office. They have more recently been characterised as 'a reshuffle rather than a reform'; even the so-called 'Kosygin reforms' that followed Khrushchev's fall, and at least brought back some measure of control over pricing and profits, gradually ran into the sands.¹⁰² It was clear by the 1970s that the era of extensive growth was over: Shanks himself noted the 'era of conservatism and increasing introversion' that had overtaken the Soviet bloc.¹⁰³ 'Historians may ... conclude', wrote the leading British Sovietologist Alec Nove in 1972, 'that the system, whatever its original logic or rationale, has for some time (literally) outgrown itself ... necessitating change in the direction of a market economy'.¹⁰⁴

Conclusions: the limits of lesson-drawing

This chapter has not aimed to undermine the role of objective performance and inevitable, indeed necessary, comparisons between nations.¹⁰⁵ It has rather attempted to show how academic and official work was shaped and reshaped by ideas of, as much as realities from, the outside world. Any number of other examples from the same period could have been given. A visit to Norway by the British Advisory Panel on the Highlands and Islands, and a research cluster on regional policy within the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) that brought British academics together with their Scandinavian colleagues, gave crucial impetus to the idea of 'growth points' as the centrepieces of the new and more market-orientated regional policy in the 1960s.¹⁰⁶ EFTA is in fact a good example of those standing bodies which made such contact and exchanges both richer and deeper than they had been before 1945. The Italian state-holding company, the Istituto per la Ricostruzione Industriale, was the subject of prolonged discussions in the official Working Party leading up to the creation of Labour's Industrial Reorganisation Corporation, with a superficially similar remit, in 1965–66.¹⁰⁷

The crucial point is that these ideas emerged from their holders, as well as from the observed 'realities' before them. In a seminal 1991 paper on Russian views of Siberia, Mark Bassin adopted the idea of 'imaginative geography', within which "'foreign" spaces were represented in terms of categories and attributes meaningful in the first instance to those doing the representing'. This construction of meaningful categories is exactly the process this essay has tried to follow in post-war Britain.¹⁰⁸ These processes have been brilliantly exposed by US historians. Frank Costigliola has reconstructed some of the hopes and fears that worked themselves out within George Kennan, the author of the Americans' post-war 'containment thesis'. Kennan's desire for acceptance in Russia, and his subsequent frustration with and rejection of that country, expose exactly these 'imaginative geographies' within the context of the Cold War.¹⁰⁹ On the evidence presented here, both inherited and novel perceptions of 'Britishness', and of other states and nations, would seem a vital adjunct to any 'ideas approach'. But too little specifically British work has been done on the lines of Bassin's and Costigliola's research.

The emphasis on higher investment, the fashion for scientific 'progress' and business methods, and the contemporary emphasis on 'skilled manpower': these showed exactly where Britons' anxieties, as well as foreign successes, actually lay. For in each sector economists, civil servants and politicians came to believe that Britain was locked into low-investment, low-effort and low-interest equilibrium. As David Stout, Director of the National Economic Development Office, put it in 1979:

The failure over twenty years to find a way to emulate the extended episodes of unusual growth in neighbouring economies has introduced further obstacles to change and deeper doubts among investors ... these obstacles lie in the organisation of the supply of ... finance ... in cautiousness about process innovation and new product development ... in industrial relations where they inhibit changes ... in pricing and other conventions where they attenuate competition.¹¹⁰

This was, in essence, a similar argument to Shanks' point about the 'sense of insecurity' that held all sides of industry back.¹¹¹ British society had, in short, become 'stuck' or 'frozen'. It could not compete with the giant blocs of the EEC and USSR; it was spiralling downwards amidst a series of self-fulfilling prophecies of decline.¹¹²

Among other factors and allied to actual statistical evidence of at least relative economic problems, the unique blend of ideas analysed here included, first, a national loss of confidence, and, second, inherited prejudices and clichés. The loss of confidence is obvious from the constant grasping at continental models. Inert preconceptions and ideologies played a more sophisticated and less all-encompassing role, and their influence can be seen in the differential impact of foreign archetypes. The French and Soviet

success stories, so surprising given those countries' struggles in the 1930s and 1940s, made more of an impact than the efforts of a Germany that for years was construed to be 'in recovery': a country which appeared weak, diplomatically easy to work with and employing economic philosophies that were thought to be less applicable than more 'organised' alternatives.¹¹³ Britons' own *self*-perceptions seem clear at least from a list of the virtues they saw in the French and Soviets and the often inappropriate policy lessons they drew. Where those alternatives were ordered, rational, scientific and 'purposeful', the British stood as Shanks condemned them: chaotic; self-indulgent; and lacking that sense of mission that world power had given them.

Some of the implications of this work suggest extremely interesting and promising lines for future research. Prime among them is the link, made in the past by Harriet Jones among others, between foreign and domestic policy. These were inseparable during the Cold War.¹¹⁴ Another avenue for research must be the international networks of academics, consultants and advisers familiar to economic historians of international trade and statistical bodies, and historians of science, as 'communication networks' or 'invisible colleges'.¹¹⁵ The Frenchman, Massé, on modernisation, and the Russian, Strumilin, on the economics of education, were important figures in changing British views of other countries, and thus of about Britain itself. Many other examples must await further research. Historians of 'policy networks' have usually dissected the role of national, rather than international, figures in the post-1945 world – and have therefore left open the question of perception and self-perception, the critical factor in some of the policy initiatives detailed in this chapter.¹¹⁶

Treatments from other traditions, for instance policy studies, have tended to focus on views of 'Europe', and explicitly European integration, as a whole. This has not always made clear the very different ideas and impressions that prevailed about the continent's constituent parts. Such present-minded approaches, by their very nature, also rather overlook the historical evolution of, and changes within, such traditions.¹¹⁷ The links between the British and continental 'epistemic communities', and between 'imaginative geographies' and policy after the Second World War, have been relatively underplayed among both 'networked' historians and policy specialists. They have therefore missed some of the reasons why so many policy 'solutions' turned out to be inapplicable in a British context – as the attempts to apply French economic planning and (as we shall see) Scandinavian social democracy demonstrate. As an example of what might be done with this new approach, we now turn to a specific and more detailed example: the lure of those 'Scandinavian' policies and their apparent success in the post-Second World War era.

3

Archetype, Example or Warning? British Views of Scandinavia

The Scandinavian example and the importance of international experts

In 1965 the Danish writer Henrik Stangerup argued that ‘we are experiencing today in Scandinavia one of the most important experiments in world history’. ‘That may sound pretentious,’ he continued, ‘yet it isn’t. The Scandinavia of today is the world’s *avant-garde* society. What is taking place among us will happen in other countries tomorrow, as soon as they have reached a comparable level of freedom and welfare.’¹ One writer praised Sweden with these words in 1970: ‘any book on Sweden’s social and economic structure tends to read like a paean of statistical superlatives. This would be wearisome. But Sweden deserves her reputation. In so many ways she is ahead of the rest of us.’² This chapter will attempt to ask exactly when, why and how these ideas were influential within the British policy-making community, for as we have seen in Chapter 2, during the 1950s and 1960s confidence gradually drained away from the British ‘model’. Experts and decision-makers searched ceaselessly for some other and more ‘successful’ country to copy, and they often thought they had found what they were looking for in Scandinavia.

‘Honeycombed’ networks of intellectuals carried great political weight in the post-war period of managed economies and welfare states. This relatively new academic field perhaps owes much to the perceived globalisation of public policy debates during the 1990s: but one critical new element of the new research programme is an attempt to delineate how ‘policy transfers’ influence the success of comparative public policies.³ Other authors have used policy transfer as one way of exploring how governments learn.⁴ But another reason for the rise of the new transnational history is the dual descriptive and analytical power of such approaches. Such a perspective has assisted historians in both outlining and explaining the course of policy in areas as far removed from one another as educational disadvantage and macroeconomic policy.⁵ A.W. Coats has, for instance, shown how

economists' sophistication, numbers and international connections assisted in the adoption of their views; the same might be said of social scientists.⁶ It may be possible in what follows to identify a relatively small number of thinkers who formed, in Peter Haas' influential treatment, an 'epistemic community'. These expert networks, relying on their advanced understanding and privileged knowledge, share normative and causal beliefs, as well as notions of validity and views of which policy instruments might work.⁷

One area of this new historiography that has seemed to remain rather under-written concerns the Scandinavian influence on public policy across the wider world. Most of the specialist literature dwells on the extent to which Scandinavian models 'failed' in the British context – in terms of centralised wage bargaining and consultation at work, for instance.⁸ Other influential treatments focus on foreign influences within the Nordic region, rather than the other way around. Trond Bergh, for instance, has shown how the success of British and US war planning influenced Norwegian economists in the 1940s.⁹ Although, as Kathleen Burk has noted, we still lack a full-length book about the history of Scandinavian engagement with the Marshall Plan, regional attempts to come to terms with post-war American power have attracted a number of rather more specialist treatments.¹⁰ Helge Pharo's early work on this subject showed the way in which the Scandinavians attempted to act as a 'bridge' between the Anglo-Americans and the Soviets, while at the same time harbouring a deep distrust of American intentions.¹¹ Rolv Amdam and Ove Bjarnar have more recently shown how Norwegians adapted the European Recovery Programme's emphasis on big business and economies of scale in a Norwegian economy still dominated by small firms. The Norwegian Labour Party emphasised co-operation, joint ventures and the pooling of research money.¹²

Such writing has often, very interestingly but somewhat allusively, focused on 'mood' and 'tone', in short on *general* perceptions, and the extremely common idea of Scandinavia as a political utopia. Among recent works, Hans Mouritzen has sketched the ways in which the 'Nordic model' was used as a foreign policy tool, boosting Scandinavian influence by self-consciously drawing attention to those countries' themes, namely peace; egalitarianism; solidarity with less developed countries; hospitality to immigrants; and environmentalism.¹³ Juhana Aunesluoma's 2003 book on Anglo-Swedish relations, though a model of its kind, focuses on diplomatic perceptions during the early Cold War, while the same author's essay on 'Britain's special relationship with Scandinavia' was couched in similar terms. There Aunesluoma demonstrated how 'a certain idealised tone' in British discussions about that region can help explain UK foreign policy. Stafford Cripps and Herbert Morrison, for instance, hugely admired Nordic social democracy.¹⁴ Arne Ruth's 1986 essay on 'the mythology of modern Sweden' remained focused at a similar level, detailing how 'the myth of the middle way grew to the point of becoming political folklore in the Anglo-Saxon world'.¹⁵

But there can be no doubt that the Scandinavian example was constantly mused over and analysed by the British elite, for this archetype was always in the back of decision-makers' minds. In almost every field of economic and social policy, whenever alternatives to British practice were mooted, Scandinavia was put forward as a model of progress. So pervasive did this approach become that in 1961 the Marxian writer Perry Anderson objected to revisionists' constant reference to the 'Swedish model' with the words:

Since the war, Sweden has become an almost mythological country. Suitably remote and out of the way, it has come to be an entity rather like the Americas in the eighteenth century, or China in the Middle Ages – not so much a normal object of real knowledge as a didactic political fable.¹⁶

Carl Bildt, Conservative Prime Minister of Sweden for three years in the 1990s, similarly remembered that 'some Social Democrats' thought 'that we represented a superior form of society'.¹⁷

General British enthusiasm for Scandinavia

There are plenty of examples of Anderson's 'mythological' appeal in action throughout the mid-twentieth century. The way in which Scandinavian governments and economies had stood up to the Depression lent their methods political and empirical support. Instead of being helplessly in power like their British colleagues during the crisis of 1929–31, the Swedish left was not only in opposition, but also in possession of new ideas. In parallel with Keynes, leftist politicians such as Ernst Wigforss had worked out their own version of 'Socialist freedom' – supported by government underwriting of demand and employment, rather than nationalisation – and were thus in a strong political position when orthodox financial approaches failed to address the crisis. The Social Democrats were able to govern Sweden in alliance with the Agrarians, with very few breaks, for decades to come.¹⁸ Sweden, and to a lesser extent Norway, became exemplars of what Esping-Andersen has termed the 'universalist' welfare state, bolstered by 'strong universalist trade unions ... [and] a labour party capable of dominating the political coalition of farmers and workers that ... permitted social democratic ascendance'.¹⁹

The American journalist Marquis Childs became an influential proponent of Sweden's interventionist methods. 'Sweden's recovery has been one of the most remarkable phenomena of the depression,' he wrote in 1936. The country's index of industrial production rose by 4 per cent between 1929 and 1934, and even unemployment fell back from its mid-1920s levels. Childs singled out the role of public works programmes, a skilled workforce and investment in industry as sheltering Swedish businesses even while the rest of the world economy was collapsing.²⁰ The Fabian Society sent

a high-level team to study this example in the summer of 1937, a group that included Hugh Gaitskell, G.D.H. Cole, D.V. Glass, the London School of Economics demographer, and Richard 'Otto' Clarke, later Second Secretary at the Treasury and Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Technology. They, too, concluded that Swedish public works projects had helped that country to weather the Depression.²¹

These plans to tackle unemployment became elements of a secular faith, that of Scandinavia – Sweden in particular – as an egalitarian exemplar and success story. For their part, post-war Swedish Social Democrats were actually often rather sceptical about high universal flat-rate benefits, paying as they did for expensive middle-class pensions rather than providing for working-class voters. High universal benefits did, however, prove very popular with the public. Sweden's vast size and regional economic disparities also precluded any calculation of a 'poverty line' that could be targeted with means-tested income support. Given these facts, Swedish Social Democrats decided to throw their lot in with universalist schemes. Britain's relatively low levels of benefits, targeted at the poor and stigmatised as support for failure, rather than claimed 'as of right', began to pale in comparison.²²

Swedish universalism was very much in Richard Crossman's mind when he launched his bid, in 1969–70, to invest state pension funds in industry, and to build up a British state superannuation fund with graduated benefits for higher earners. Sweden's supplementary pensions had been introduced in 1959, and were intended to top up pensions so that they amounted to two-thirds of wage earners' income while in work.²³ Crossman was cheered by Tage Erlander's assurances, at a dinner held by the Swedish Embassy in London, that this was both an uncomplicated and a popular scheme. 'I began to realize', wrote Crossman in his diary, 'how lucky the Swedes were to get on to national superannuation early. They didn't have to tell the electors any details of their scheme or its costing.' He spent five days in Sweden during December 1968, studying their system.²⁴

Other Nordic nations did attract admiration, but for rather different reasons. Nazi Germany's invasion and occupation of Norway naturally enraged British public opinion, and was to provide the context for British views of Norway long after the war had ended. One book reviewer commented as late as 1980 that 'during the war, the Norwegians never lost their self-respect. The Swedes played their double game; the Danes never entered the struggle (apart from their admirable latter-day resistance), but the Norwegians ... sent King and government to London ... kept the national flame alight and worked for the end of the war.'²⁵ No high-level visit of the post-war era was complete without some reference to Norway's prolonged struggle. On Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's visit to Norway in 1960, he placed a wreath, as the Foreign Office memorandum put it, 'on the memorial to Norwegian patriots executed by the Germans at the Akershus Fortress'. Then King Olav 'unveiled a statue erected by public subscription in Oslo to the memory of members of

the British forces who died in Norway during the war'.²⁶ These military ties were personal as well as sentimental: King Olav, for instance, was Colonel in Chief of the Green Howards Regiment. On his State Visit to Britain in 1961, he inspected a Guard of Honour of Regular and Territorial Army units, accompanied by his own liaison officer for the Green Howards.²⁷

Norway's decision to join NATO reinforced this impression. According to the travel writer Gordon Young, Norway's accession to the Western alliance confirmed her as 'the most ruggedly "Western-minded" of the Scandinavian countries' and 'it has been natural that, since the war, it has been the Norwegians who have taken the leadership in the North'. Norwegians' access to the open wilderness, and their perceived physical prowess at skiing and climbing, were apparently as notable as their height. 'The mountains are the key to everything in Norway,' he thought: the wilderness and the mountains were apparently at the heart of Norwegians' spirited individualism, their 'outward-looking approach' and their refusal to retreat into neutrality. On the eve of war, he pointed out, Norway had possessed the fourth biggest merchant navy in the world, and her people formed one of the most notable immigrant groups in North America.²⁸ Military links, forged in the Second World War and in NATO, would cement Britain's relationship with Norway for some time to come.

British 'inefficiency' and the realities of early industrialisation

In contrast to British amateurism and incompetence, the Scandinavians were supposed to be expert, efficient and organised. Per Kleppe, Norwegian Minister of Finance from 1973 to 1979, commented on this in 1976 when he argued that there were 'watertight bulkheads' preventing British governments from drawing on proper economic advice, while in Norway a new economic policy had been developed free of 'conventional thinking'. In 1969–70, there were more economists employed within Norway's much smaller government service than there were in the whole of Whitehall.²⁹ Peter Bierge, director of that country's statistical bureau, reinforced this case in his 1959 book on *Planning in Norway*. Though outcomes had not always matched statisticians' projections, he demonstrated that there was no consistent planning bias towards over-optimism or undue pessimism. And, he argued, Norway's statisticians were improving their accuracy all the time.³⁰ Scandinavia, it appeared, had solved the riddle of low inflation, and high and consistent economic growth, supporting a welfare state that was generous but did not stifle effort and innovation, and which was managed by a numerate class of expert technocrats. Britain, it seemed, would inevitably have to copy this example.

There are a number of good reasons, however, to see this fervour as rather overdone. One serious problem with Britons' emphasis on Scandinavia's

success was that it seized on economic growth *rates*, rather than per capita *incomes*. Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland did indeed grow more quickly than the United Kingdom during the 'Golden Age'. As we can see from Figure 3.1, their Gross Domestic Product per head doubled or tripled between the early 1950s and early 1970s, while that of the United Kingdom went up by 'only' 74 per cent. However, the Scandinavian countries, especially in the cases of Finland and Norway, had started from a lower base, as Figure 3.2 implies. Only Denmark's GDP was at the same level as Britain's in 1950, though Sweden was not far behind. Norwegians were still poorer than Britons in 1973, despite Norway's relatively rapid economic growth, as they had started a long way behind. Economic growth had made Finns 200 per cent richer per capita, but they were still the poorest of the five countries. Those countries were able to adopt newer techniques, draw on more rural labour and utilise newer working practices than the relatively satisfied and complacent British.³¹ This then built up into a self-perpetuating 'virtuous circle', during which each round of economic acceleration made the next easier. But as Figure 3.2 again makes clear, even successful countries did not end up all that far ahead. Denmark, the leader in terms of GDP per head, was only 15 per cent ahead of Britain in 1973; Sweden outstripped the UK by 12 per cent.

These relative latecomers to economic modernity, Sweden in particular, were able to specialise in what they were good at. Sweden, for instance, built up massive export surpluses of pulp and paper; iron ore; and in mechanical and electrical engineering.³² Most of her progress was then based around

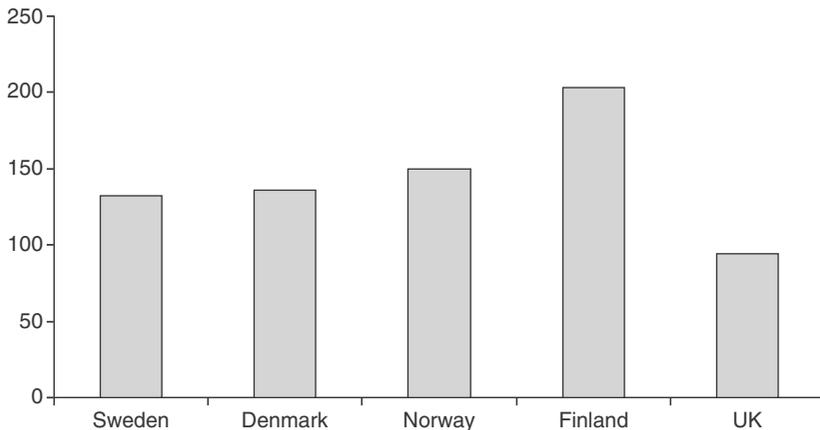


Figure 3.1 Growth in per capita GDP of the UK and three Scandinavian nations, 1950–73, \$1990 per head

Source: A. Maddison, *The World Economy: A Millennial Perspective*, Paris, OECD, 2001, table c1-b, pp. 272–3.

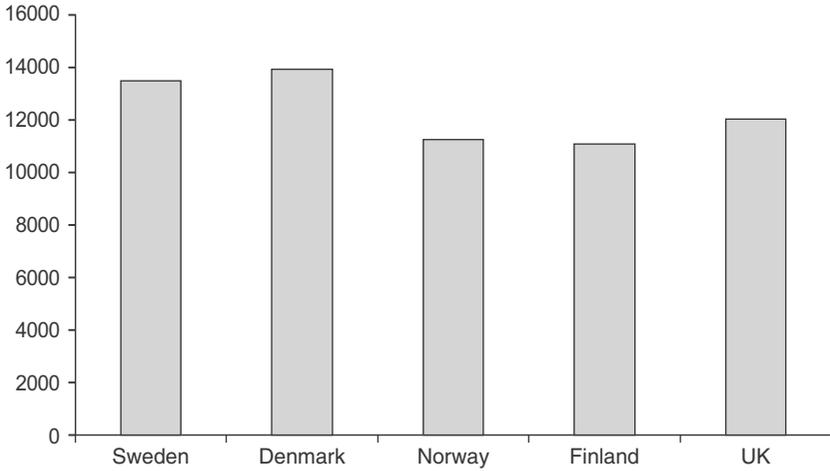


Figure 3.2 Per capita GDP of the UK and three Scandinavian nations, 1973, \$1990 per head
 Source: A. Maddison, *The World Economy: A Millennial Perspective*, Paris, OECD, 2001, table c1-b, pp. 272–3.

'hot house' giants that dominated capital investment and technological change. These included AGA (electronics), Electrolux (home appliances) and Volvo (cars). All of them established their dominance in the pre-war, rather than post-war, world.³³ They thus added to the concentrated, 'organised', corporate world of centralised wage bargaining and strong ties with the central government. As a Fabian team that visited the country in 1947 noted, the Norwegian government had played a key role in wage negotiations since the threat of compulsory arbitration became law in 1915.³⁴ The virtuous circle so admired by Whitehall planners went back a long way: so far, indeed, that some American social scientists thought that these economic facts were behind her entire social system. As one Princeton academic wrote in 1955: 'progressive industrialisation and urbanisation in the late nineteenth century transformed the old estate commonwealth into the "Sweden of the organisations"'.³⁵

It is not even clear that British admiration for 'organised capitalism' was really all that justified, for the success of the Swedish and Norwegian economies, in particular, could be put down to a number of other factors. It was not just their relative 'backwardness' in the early twentieth century that made their experience different from Britain's, but the relative openness of their economies. More of Sweden's, and especially Norway's, wealth was traded across her borders than was Britain's.³⁶ As Even Lange and Helge Pharo have pointed out in the Norwegian context, it was the *combination* of

relatively liberal trade policies with internal controls to encourage exports that probably explains a great deal of Norway's post-war growth.³⁷ Joel Mokyr has recently concurred. He has shown that, in an internationalised economy, 'there seem to have been fewer advantages to being big'. Just as Scandinavian economies were able to hot-house national champions in small economic niches, they have been able to take advantage of an increasingly globalised marketplace to exchange those high-technology products for those goods they could not produce.³⁸

Two other factors have contributed to this open and competitive success, recently emphasised in a collection of essays on the Finnish economy edited by Jari Ojala, Jari Eloranta and Jukka Jalava. These are, first, another type of 'openness', namely the very low levels of corruption in these economies, and, second, these societies' commitment to education.³⁹ Economic planning and a mix of public-private enterprises would seem to have little to do with this, at least directly. Focusing on planning zeroed in quite properly on the supply-side of the economy, but missed much of the 'soft' social and intellectual infrastructure that made it work. As we shall see, this self-same phenomenon of copying *structures*, rather than more amorphous social *relationships*, would hamper British attempts to innovate in the housing market.

Far from being more planned, and more stable, it is possible to argue that the Nordic success stories were based on global free trade, and an acceptance of some of the instability that goes with being a small power under such conditions. British planners aimed at a more stable expansion during the 1960s, but Swedish growth was *less* stable than Britain's during the 1950s and 1960s.⁴⁰ Even so, her economy grew more quickly. This helps to call some British views of the Scandinavian economies – that they were more smoothly planned, allowing incomes and economy to grow in tandem – into question. Trying to transplant this organic structure furthermore ignored the peculiarly British variant of capitalism. Late industrialisation and industrial centralisation had made Scandinavia a relatively receptive place for concerted economic efforts. British history had taken a different course, and it is important in considering the following treatment to understand that the UK economy was unlikely to respond to similar treatment.

British ambivalence towards Scandinavia

Despite the unfavourable comparison with Scandinavia's apparently strong economic growth and dynamism, some more fundamental and underlying ambivalence was evident both within and between British policy-making communities: Patricia Clavin has drawn our attention to such countercurrents by writing about 'repulsion, rather than attraction' in other examples.⁴¹ Admirable though some Scandinavian domestic policies might be, it remained the case that only the Norwegians were seen as truly reliable

military allies. The Swedes, their martial reputation marred by staying out of the Second World War, were a neutral country that Britain's leaders had no wish to emulate. The idea of becoming a 'greater Sweden' simply did not appeal, either morally or – more immediately – in terms of the influence Britain could bring to bear on nuclear weapons negotiations. 'If we did not go into [the] EEC', Quintin Hailsham confided to Selwyn Lloyd in 1962, 'he feared we would become neutral. There would be a Sweden, Switzerland, UK neutral group. We would have to give up nuclear weapons.' One of the main elements of Britain's 'place in the world' would be at risk.⁴²

As Hailsham's private views made clear, the very reason why British politicians wished to join the EEC was so that they would *not* become like the Swedes or, an alternative that seemed even worse, the Swiss. As Britain's Foreign Office negotiator wrote back to Rab Butler in 1964: 'it has for long been commonplace to envisage the role of a "greater Sweden" as one of the alternatives before us. I feel it is in fact, in the long run, the only option open to us unless we can establish a satisfactory relationship with the European Community.'⁴³ Civil servants deprecated the idea of retreating behind the walls of a 'fortress Britain' and an economically protectionist policy when the Wilson government considered its European options in 1966. 'The adoption of such a course', they argued, 'by a country which, unlike Sweden or Switzerland, has not opted for a role of international neutrality would clearly relegate the United Kingdom to a position of secondary influence in world affairs.'⁴⁴

Deeper fears, often taking on a moralistic or puritanical tone, were also intertwined in Britons' views of Scandinavia. Sweden, in particular, was perceived by middle-of-the-road Britons as rich and egalitarian, but also costly, inflationary and licentious.⁴⁵ As so often, the novelist Graham Greene touched on his countrymen's most profound concerns when he visited Stockholm in the summer of 1933. He was there to ruminate on the future shape of his novel *England Made Me*, which was to be set in Sweden. As he later wrote in *The Spectator*, despite that city's beauty, there was a certain undertow of pride, violent self-assertion and, not least, of hypocrisy. 'Our little country, our little country, the Swedish lawyer and the Swedish publisher kept repeating', he wrote, 'with sentimental humility and a deep hidden arrogance ... in his formal houses, the Swedish pacifist supported war between races. He grew excited at the thought of Russia, spoke of the glory of a war of extermination.' 'So clean, so clean': Greene remembered the Swedish middle classes' self-interested praise of the working people they kept giving 'just enough to live on'.⁴⁶

Greene's portrait of the decadent English in *England Made Me*, including the corruption of the supposed Old Harrovian Anthony Farrant, is hardly flattering about Britons themselves. But the Swedes come out of his fictional treatment remarkably badly, especially in the figure of the monstrous businessman Krogh, afraid lest anyone find out about 'the American monopoly

which even his directors believed to be still in the stage of negotiation'. Krogh was in fact based on the person of Ivar Kreuger, who before his death in 1933 controlled three-quarters of the world's trade in matchsticks, and who thought little of manipulating his near-monopoly, or of negotiating with unpleasant regimes.⁴⁷ It is important to bear Greene's reservations in mind, for identifying enthusiasm for Scandinavian policies should not be thought to mean that influential Britons wanted uncritically to copy Nordic society as a whole.

British wages policy and Nordic centralised bargaining

Despite such ambivalence at general political and cultural levels, one area in which Scandinavian countries were thought to be world leaders was in wage bargaining. Nationally applicable annual deals were struck there between centralised trade union federations and employers' organisations, a scheme that was supposed to allow national macroeconomic needs to be taken into account along with individual sectors' demands. As we shall see, it was in particular Sweden's experience following the 1938 Saltsjöbaden Agreement between employers and trade unions that fascinated outsiders. Gøsta Esping-Andersen, for instance, has analysed such policies as a crucial economic element in the 'solidaristic' Nordic model of capitalism based around 'a welfare state that would promote an equality of the highest standards, not an equality of minimal needs'.⁴⁸

Norway's Basic Agreement on wages was even older, dating to 1935. But based as it was on compulsory arbitration, direct union democracy and legally binding agreements monitored by government, most British observers thought it too interventionist to be of use elsewhere.⁴⁹ The Saltsjöbaden Agreement was more voluntarist than the Norwegian system, but by driving up wages, and combined with a famously 'active' labour market policy that concentrated on collaboration with trade unions and retraining, Social Democrats hoped to encourage productivity as well as build a fairer society. The 'Rehn-Meidner model', named after the Swedish Social Democrats Gustav Rehn and Rudolf Meidner, therefore represented the glory of Nordic social democracy from the 1930s to the 1970s.⁵⁰ But beyond this quite justified emphasis on labour market policies, the impression remains that there has been little sustained or rigorous examination of direct Scandinavian influences on *British* policy-making.

Adopting this system was generally thought to encourage wage restraint, the more efficient use of resources, higher productivity and better industrial relations more generally. Michael Shanks, author of Penguin's *The Stagnant Society* and an influential commentator on Britain's perceived economic decline, was very clear that 'we need to move towards the sort of centralised annual bargaining between unions, government and employers which exists in the Scandinavian countries'.⁵¹ Some well-placed civil servants,

for instance the Ministry of Labour's Permanent Secretary James Dunnett, shared these hopes. Dunnett told his staff that annual wage rounds co-ordinated across each industry, rather than at company or plant level, could strengthen the hand of the TUC and employers' groups over separate unions and firms. 'If this could be done', he wrote, 'we would be moving towards the kind of annual or biennial confrontation that takes place between the unions and the employers in Sweden.'⁵²

This presented the Conservatives, in government in the early 1960s and desperately searching for some *modus operandi* with the unions, with a problem. For Scandinavian-style incomes policies relied on an atmosphere of co-operation, as well as the mechanics of centralisation. John Hare, Harold Macmillan's Minister of Labour when the Prime Minister began his fruitless pursuit of a 'new course' in 1961, told Parliament that he recognised that 'these systems have relied on the mutual agreement of employers and workers. Without that agreement neither system would work. Our traditions are somewhat different ... But I do not think it impossible that we here at home can work out in agreement methods suited to our own circumstances and national outlook.'⁵³

There was a market-orientated element to this approval, as well as optimism based around the efficacy of planning. The OECD singled out Norway as an example of successful price regulation in 1964. Not only did the government control some politically sensitive prices, such as dairy produce and hospital fees, but the well-staffed and resourced Price Inspectorate could also order price stops and investigations if and when companies were deemed to be taking advantage of restrictive practices.⁵⁴ Even Conservatives were attracted by this model, apparently a semi-planned variant of capitalism. During his 1960 visit to Norway, Harold Macmillan confided in his diary just how deeply gloomy he was about the future of free-market Conservative politics:

[Norwegian] 'applied Socialism' is of a fairly moderate kind and the Government is, in many respects, not unlike our Progressive Conservative Government ... [but] I think both Sweden and Norway present the policies which Mr Gaitskell seeks vainly to impose on the British Labour Party. If he were to succeed, they too would win power and hold it for a long time.⁵⁵

The government therefore arranged for trade unionists to visit Sweden in October 1962, so that they could study the Swedes' methods.⁵⁶ Most of the TUC's Economic Committee met Swedish trade unionists, civil servants, ministers and industrialists, but the British Ambassador was gloomy as to the impact of this visit:

I do not think they or any of the other members have yet any clear idea how to make use of Sweden's experience in the TUC's deliberations about

economic and wages policy and the structure of the trade union movement. I have the impression that most of the delegates were thinking of using what they saw here rather to improve and develop the organisation and work of their individual unions, and by enhancing inter-union co-operation to move toward a more effective organisation at the centre, rather than as material for any direct reorganisation of the TUC.⁵⁷

The TUC, whose delegation included George Woodcock, the TUC's Secretary General, as well as Frank Cousins and Len Murray among other TUC luminaries, was in fact entirely unpersuaded of the need to change its own plant-level practices. They focused on the 'atmosphere' of co-operation, to the exclusion of some of the structural policies that had helped to foster that mood. 'Active manpower policy', for instance, was warmly welcomed, but not really brought into the TUC's analysis of how incomes policy worked. The pamphlet that eventually emerged from this visit was written by Jack Cooper, General Secretary of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers. It was extremely sceptical about the centralised bargaining system. 'It would certainly be a mistake', Cooper wrote, '... to conclude that if we remodel [any] aspect of our system on the Swedish pattern we shall achieve the same measure of success.' He settled for blaming employers' lack of co-operation.⁵⁸ The British system of industrial relations granted enormous independent power to the individual unions whose representatives went on the trip to Stockholm; they were not about to give up their privileges to anyone, least of all in alliance with a Conservative government.

On entering government in 1964, Labour was less encumbered by ambivalence over government intervention than the Conservatives. One 'Swedish-style' plan was outlined to the relevant National Executive subcommittee by Nicholas Kaldor, one of Labour's most important economic advisers. The Swedish wealth tax, he pointed out, began at an annual 0.5 per cent of each individual's net worth, and steadily increased to 1.8 per cent. A slice of inherited wealth, and company profits, was therefore nationalised.⁵⁹ The money raised might even have been used to buy up shares in industry, a much more radical idea proposed by the Socialist thinker Arthur Lewis in *Socialist Commentary* in 1955.⁶⁰ But Labour chose not to take up this idea, preferring to bring in a capital gains tax that would not fall on individuals' stock of wealth, but rather on their new earnings from profits. The alternative of a 'Swedish' wealth tax had proved simply too radical for Labour to contemplate. Labour's adherence to traditional nationalisation and controls, along with the fear that investment might be lowered by shifting resources from savers to those more likely to spend and consume, ensured that James Callaghan as Chancellor did not adopt the idea.⁶¹

All the same, Andrew Shonfield's influential 1965 book *Modern Capitalism* demonstrated what Labour hoped to achieve by pursuing some 'Swedish' methods: a greater degree of economic planning, but without the supply-side

rigidities and political unpopularity associated with nationalisation. This would not necessarily include wage restraint, since well-placed Scandinavian workers were busy making double-digit wage claims. But emphasising Swedish successes did provide a basis for promoting an 'active manpower policy', combining the familiar Scandinavian elements of increased government help and organisation in the fields of industrial training, retraining and relocation. 'An atmosphere is created in the course of ... long and detailed negotiation', Shonfield wrote of centralised wage bargaining, 'covering a wide area of industrial and economic policy, which leads easily to a discussion of methods of achieving a more productive use of labour in various fields.'⁶² Shonfield especially admired the Labour Market Board's 'shelf' of ready-made infrastructure projects, underpinning demand and making sure that the bargaining process was buoyed by the rising tide of prosperity. Through such measures, Sweden was supposed to have avoided widespread nationalisation, fusing Keynesian counter-cyclical management with more *dirigiste* intervention.⁶³ A network of Trading Agencies, which were owned by the state, and a variety of State Companies, not entirely managed by the government, filled the breach.⁶⁴ Anthony Crosland's famous *Future of Socialism* pointed to this as an alternative to wholesale nationalisation.⁶⁵

Sir Eric Roll, Permanent Secretary of Labour's new Department of Economic Affairs (DEA), received the same advice from his officials after a DEA visit to Sweden in April 1965. After long meetings with the Swedish Labour Market Board and Ministry of Finance, officials 'found the Swedish incomes policy something of a disappointment. Despite elaborate machinery, they still continue to get wage drift and rising prices.' But the DEA advisers agreed with Shonfield as to the wider gains of centralised negotiation and organisation. 'By far the most important lesson for the UK', they wrote, 'is to be found in their [the Swedes'] labour market policy.' Swedish unions were thought to be much less resistant to change when they could see the gains they were receiving for their co-operation – not that this helped British policy-makers to bring labour market policies together with prices and incomes intervention.⁶⁶

In the final analysis, the Scandinavian influence on incomes policy was limited by what Jim Tomlinson has termed the 'iron quadrilateral' constraining all policy innovation in Britain: free collective bargaining, tripartite decision-making, Parliamentary sovereignty and traditional nationalisation.⁶⁷ The Scandinavian example threatened all of these. At the most sensitive point, wages policy, where each partner was threatened by 'Nordic' innovations, the interested groups rejected reform. The TUC's attitude in 1962–63 is only one case in point. The failure went deeper, too, reflecting the inherent problems of applying an archetype to actual policies outside the country in which ideals first became real. The particular circumstances that had helped the system gain purchase in Scandinavia – the Depression, centralised employer and trade union organisations, a strong commitment to

the high taxes, benefits and supply-side action that helped make the system work – were simply not present in the Britain of the 1960s.⁶⁸

Scandinavian housing and Britain's 'new' co-operatives

International policy transfer can be analysed even more closely in at least one area of British social administration in the post-war era, for Sweden's housing policies were therein thought to be particularly attractive in terms of industrialised building, partly because Stockholm had led the way in standardising building materials, parts and working methods. Sweden's national Committee of Standardization, working with the Industrial Association and the Technologists' Federation, had initiated the standardisation of building components and new technology in the 1920s.⁶⁹ This was praised by international agencies such as the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, which noted in a 1959 report that building costs were increasing less rapidly in Sweden than elsewhere.⁷⁰ This rather amorphous sense that northern countries were taking advantage of industrialised building had direct effects, for the announcement of a National Building Agency in late 1963 was also couched in terms of the Scandinavian example. Geoffrey Rippon, Minister of Public Building and Works, told Conservative MPs that:

[The] proposed National Building Agency ... would give expert and technical advice on new building techniques. Sweden was well advanced in building productivity. In this country a stream of houses was now being built by non-traditional methods, and considerable savings had already been effected in school building by this means.⁷¹

The interest in Scandinavian housing *per se* was a constant theme in private policy discussions. Ministry of Housing civil servants and other experts on that department's subcommittee looking into flat building and community life studied a number of Swedish government publications provided by the International Union of Local Authorities in 1951.⁷² Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, Ministry of Housing and Ministry of Works officials visited Sweden in December 1945, May 1957, July 1958 and April 1960 to study prefabrication. They came back with generally favourable impressions.⁷³ The Ministry of Housing asked for reports from Britain's Norwegian Embassy during 1964. The Ministry was interested in that country's Housing Banks, and the tensions between public demands for new houses and for easy access to the countryside.⁷⁴

In the early 1960s this pervasive esteem coalesced into something more – literally – concrete, as ministers and officials found one answer to Britain's pervasive housing shortages in the Scandinavian co-operative movement. This was yet another middle-way solution with attractions similar to Shonfield's enthusiasm for state-supervised but privately run corporations.

Government White Papers at the time were quite explicit about this, referring to 'the "joint ownership" housing associations which have been so successful in Scandinavia'.⁷⁵ Two types of co-operative housing were provided for in the 1961 Housing Act that followed those White Papers, which was then followed up by a further Act in 1964. 'Cost-rent' societies would be formed by builders and administrators who would then let the flats to the general public at cost prices, without making a profit. 'Co-ownership societies' were a type of collective owner-occupation, which would be formed by proprietors who would group themselves into a co-operative and then lease their dwellings back from the society. £28m was provided for 'pump-priming' operations under the 1961 Act, and £100m for a new Housing Corporation, set up to encourage these developments, in 1964.⁷⁶

Academic, political and media attention had been focused on just this solution for some time. The Fabian Rosalie Alford published a pamphlet on the subject in 1957, which began by demonstrating how successful Scandinavian experiments had been.⁷⁷ The Co-Operative Party published a report on housing co-operatives in 1959, which included a two-page summary of the situation in Sweden, a page on Denmark and half a page on Norway's experiments.⁷⁸ The London School of Economics academic John Greve followed this up in 1961 with another Fabian publication on the general problem of housing, which contained a chapter on the 'encouraging' experience in Scandinavia.⁷⁹ Lewis Waddilove, Director of the Joseph Rowntree Trust and extremely well connected in the housing policy community, published a further pamphlet on the subject for *Political and Economic Planning* in 1962. He took Sweden as an exemplar, its policies not only getting more houses built, but also fostering a 'strong sense of responsibility for, and interest in, the neighbourhood as a whole'. International organisations played a role in spreading these ideas, and Waddilove quoted liberally from their works.⁸⁰ The UN had already pointed out in its 1959 housebuilding report that more than one-third of Swedish building was being conducted by not-for-profit societies, and it implicitly linked their large-scale effort to Sweden's relatively rapid adoption of standardised building techniques.⁸¹

The Central Housing Advisory Committee (CHAC), set up to advise the minister in the mid-1930s, was one settled institutional arena through which these ideas were communicated: Sir Parker Morris from the National Federation of Housing Societies, and a keen advocate of expanding their role, was just one influential member. Builders such as Wates Ltd allied themselves uneasily with Morris when they argued in CHAC that 'the improved financial climate' of 1960 'brought nearer the possibility of private enterprise coming back into housing to let'.⁸² Members of the Committee, which included Waddilove, continuously 'commented on the fact that private enterprise building is concentrated almost exclusively on building to sell, and so does not meet the needs of those who can afford an unsubsidised

rent, but have no wish to buy'.⁸³ The creation of a Ministry of Housing working party on buildings to let, on which the National Federation of Building Trades Employers were well represented and which recommended the creation of a new type of not-for-profit 'housing trusts', can be traced to these concerns.⁸⁴ Most importantly for our purposes, a number of its members had been to Norway and Sweden to look into this idea in August and September 1958. Waddilove, Coventry's City Treasurer A.H. Marshall, and two Ministry civil servants submitted a long memorandum on this subject to CHAC on their return. They praised those countries' 'valuable third partner', which provided for tenants who 'are unwilling to face the full responsibility of home ownership ... who up to now have not looked beyond rented accommodation ... these advantages are highly regarded in Scandinavia and should be equally welcomed here'.⁸⁵

It is fair to note that Henry Brooke, Minister of Housing in 1961 and 1962, did resist some of this pressure. He told CHAC that this 'was the sort of thing he had in mind although what suited, say, Sweden would not necessarily exactly suit this country'.⁸⁶ When he introduced his Bill in the House of Commons, Brooke weakly referred only to co-operatives being 'well-established in other countries', though MPs did not miss the idea's Scandinavian pedigree. The prevalent general admiration for Scandinavia meant that this emphasis was brought out much more clearly in debate. The Liberal Donald Wade evoked the Danish case, since he argued that in that country half of all housing was owned by non-profit associations. 'I see no reason why we should not follow the example of Denmark,' he concluded. Keith Joseph, at this stage the Ministry's Parliamentary Secretary and himself from a building industry family, was more enthusiastic than his immediate superior.⁸⁷ He had already been in contact with Waddilove, enthusing about the latter's PEP pamphlet, and caught the mood of several contributors to the debate when he wound up.⁸⁸ 'We shall soon have in this country', he hoped, 'examples of the co-operative housing which has served the people of Scandinavia so well.'⁸⁹

The scheme was not, however, designed to play the same role as Scandinavian co-operatives. The entire rationale was to encourage more private renting, rather than to develop the type of large-scale co-operatives that the government enthused about in public. The 1963 White Paper setting up the Housing Corporation was quite clear about this:

Since the war there has been almost no building to let other than by public authorities. Fear of rent control, and of the problems associated with management, maintenance and repair, has discouraged private investment. The result is a gap in housing provision; and this the Government intend to see filled.⁹⁰

In private, ministers were even more aggressively ideological. Joseph and Michael Noble, Secretary of State for Scotland, told the Cabinet in 1963 that

the main problem with the housing market was that private investors were difficult to find. Furthermore, they argued:

The main reason for this is the Opposition's declared intention to reimpose rent control. This has done much to undermine confidence ... Given this situation, either we have to accept it, thus letting our policy be dictated by the Opposition, or find some means of remedying it. And that is what our proposals do.⁹¹

The Conservatives had been very badly damaged by the political repercussions of their attempt to decontrol rents fixed, in some cases, since the Second World War.⁹² Ministers were searching urgently for a way of encouraging housebuilding without further attacking rent controls, or returning to the general council housebuilding that Labour had always advocated. They were not interested in any attempt to embed co-operative societies in the British housing system.

Joseph went on to tell Conservative backbenchers that 'our past housing failure had been that the rented housing field had been left to the Socialist threat', and to 'suggest ... that it might in future be possible to transfer the management of bad housing to housing societies' on the model of Oslo's transfers carried out in the early 1950s.⁹³ When the Chancellor, Reginald Maudling, refused to contemplate tax concessions, Joseph told him angrily that 'you cannot want to contemplate an endless vista of extending municipal ownership any more than I. But that is what we do contemplate if we cannot set up an alternative.'⁹⁴ Rippon termed those people that CHAC had identified, torn between buying and renting and getting little out of either, as 'this literally middle class': the Ministry estimated their incomes at between £12 and £18 a week, placing them firmly in the upper middle income bracket.⁹⁵

On top of these dissimilarities in commission were differences of omission, and specifically the Ministry of Housing's failure to secure tax exemptions for cost-rent housing. The Building Societies Association, which would have to put up two-thirds of the money for each scheme, complained about this from the outset. As the mortgage was gradually paid off by any Housing Society, their operating surpluses would go up, as would their liability to income tax and profits tax.⁹⁶ Homeowners furthermore received income tax relief on interest payments on their mortgage, an advantage that did not apply to renters. The Inland Revenue was prepared to allow co-ownership schemes to receive this help, since they were in effect collective ownership groups, and this relief was paid from 1963 onwards.⁹⁷ But it would go no further on cost-renting, and negotiations stalled when the Revenue chose to use its mastery of detailed tax law and statistics to fend off the Ministry's attacks. 'We found it rather difficult to keep up with them in argument', one Ministry of Housing official noted, 'but they were prepared to go a long way to meet us', at least on co-ownership.⁹⁸

The Ministry of Housing's Permanent Secretary, Evelyn Sharp, was always sceptical about the Ministry's ability to make further progress. She noted in 1963 that 'we have always known that it was very doubtful whether cost-renting could compete, even with 40 year money'.⁹⁹ And indeed the Inland Revenue refused to give further ground after its initial concessions towards co-ownership societies, on income tax, profits tax, income tax relief, or even on tax relief for repairs and maintenance.¹⁰⁰ Richard Crossman, Labour's first Minister of Housing on that party's return to office in 1964, tried again to gain tax relief in the run-up to the 1965 Budget. Concerned to maintain Labour's housing drive, James Callaghan as Chancellor agreed to let the Ministry of Housing use £1m from its own Budget to make up some of the difference. But this was explicitly not a tax relief and, as mortgage rates and housing costs rose later in the decade, would be totally inadequate in bridging the gap.¹⁰¹ Without hope of profit, and legally required to run an operating surplus which they were then taxed on, *The Economist* predicted the societies' future with great clarity: 'a small stream of fairly high cost middle class houses, perhaps often rather arty, let at average rents of between £6 and £8 a week'.¹⁰² They were therefore far too expensive to be useful for general needs housing: the CHAC and the Ministry working party had originally been working on lines of perhaps £1.50 to £4 a week.¹⁰³

Co-operative 'Scandinavianisation': the results

The 1961 and 1964 experiments ended up reinforcing just that obsession with owner-occupation that the Conservatives had hoped for, though not in the manner they had expected. Only 1600 'cost-rent' dwellings were ever built. As the Housing Corporation itself admitted to the Cohen Committee on Housing Associations in 1971, as soon as interest rates rose above 7 per cent in the late 1960s, cost-rent schemes were a dead letter. Owner-occupiers received increased amounts of mortgage income tax relief; putative 'cost-renters' would not.¹⁰⁴ Co-ownership schemes got further, mainly because owners could reap tax relief on their mortgage interest payments, and after five years leave these schemes and take their home's capital appreciation with them.¹⁰⁵ But even at their peak there were only 40,000 co-ownership dwellings to place alongside those built for cost-rent. By the late 1970s and early 1980s the two types of dwelling accounted for 0.2 per cent of Britain's housing stock, as against 16 per cent in Sweden and 19 per cent in Norway.¹⁰⁶

Britain simply did not provide subsidy on the same scale as the Scandinavian schemes. Housing Corporation loans might provide up to a third of any Society's total capital, over 40 years, at only a one-quarter percentage point difference to prevailing building society rates. Norwegian government backing was provided through longer loans – up to 100 years – and a greater differential between market and State Housing Bank interest

rates.¹⁰⁷ In Norway two-thirds of the building cost might be met by loans from the State Housing Bank, rather than just one-third.¹⁰⁸ In Sweden first mortgages for housing societies were provided two and a quarter percentage points below the market rate. Although owner-occupiers could claim mortgage income tax relief in the Scandinavian countries, just as they did in Britain, the level of state subsidy to the entire system not only lessened their advantage, but also led to more capital overall coming into the housing market rather than into equity or other investment. The British Housing Acts of 1961 and 1964 were small by comparison. Greve indeed condemned the 1961 scheme as being 'barely sufficient to lubricate the pump handle', rather than providing a true 'pump-priming' exercise.¹⁰⁹ CHAC's advice in 1958 had been specifically against 'a small scale experiment' that 'could at the best be of little value, and might be positively misleading. In both Norway and Sweden, although the tradition of co-operative enterprise is more deeply rooted than it is here, a strong central stimulus has proved necessary.' Without strong direction, they believed that the advantages of pooling management money and expertise, and of a central agency pushing up design standards, would be lost.¹¹⁰ Governments chose to ignore this advice, a decision that would be later condemned by a Department of the Environment Working Party on Housing Co-Operatives that reported in 1975.¹¹¹

Given the disparities within an already very complex and well-entrenched tax system and housing market, Britain's new and expanded Housing Association movement could never – indeed, was never intended to – provide housing for more than very specific groups. We have already seen that Conservative ministers intended to cater for middle-class salaried workers: the housing expert J.B. Cullingworth called them 'the better-paid people who wanted to be mobile'. Moreover, even such an enthusiast as Joseph singled out the 'middle-aged or elderly' who 'could not get a mortgage' on account of their age. Joining together in a corporate Housing Society would help solve that problem.¹¹² The profile of the UK housing stock also constrained co-operatives' appeal. The Scottish Development Department official R.D. Cramond was enthusiastic about a 'Third Force' in housing. But, as he pointed out in a perceptive *Public Administration* article in 1965, written during visits to Scandinavia as a Fellow of the University of Glasgow, Scandinavians (and especially Swedes) were much more likely than the British to live in flats. Communal provision for landscaping, the exterior and the roof made much more sense there than in Britain.¹¹³

Policy-makers' imported concepts were deeply flawed at a more general level. Behind their specific attempt to inculcate enthusiasm for co-operative housing was a broader analysis, impressed by what was seen as Scandinavia's coalition between builders, buyers and tenants; the use of industrialised techniques; and utilisation of planning controls and moral suasion in leading the whole process. This would prove exceptionally difficult in Britain,

especially given the divisions and reversals of the 1950s and 1960s. Peter Malpass has termed British housing policy the welfare state's 'wobbly pillar', the sector in which Whitehall policy-makers had fewest controls. This meant that central governments' ambitions were always couched simply in terms of overall targets, and debates over whether to build local authority or private housing. Less thought was given to the mechanics of land-use planning, rent policy or building the right type of, rather than simply more, houses.¹¹⁴ The Conservative government of the 1950s indeed dismantled large parts of Labour's planned policy for land use, denationalising development rights and going all out, first to build many more local authority houses, and then to encourage owner-occupation.¹¹⁵

The timeframe was also unrealistic. The Scandinavian model had been established over a very long period. The major Workmen's Co-Operative Housing Society in Copenhagen was founded in 1912; the SKB, the Co-Operative Housing Society of Stockholm, in 1916. OBOS, the main Oslo co-operative, dated from 1929.¹¹⁶ Waddilove and Marshall's 1958 report had itself demonstrated the very dense and supportive administrative structure that had been given time to flourish around these voluntary bodies. In Sweden, for instance, there were three layers of national, district and estate societies that supported one another, while in Norway the major independent co-operatives operated on at least two levels. 'In practice, management is usually undertaken on behalf of the estate society by the district society,' Waddilove and Marshall noted, with positive effects such as increased participation and direct democracy in elections to the councils of those district societies.¹¹⁷ The regional offices of the Housing Corporation never played this role, rather focusing on policing the legal forms of co-operatives' internal affairs.¹¹⁸ The British government was attempting to build a similar movement, from above, in just a few years. In game-theory terms familiar to economists, the game had not been 'iterated' – continued – long enough for trust to build up between the players.¹¹⁹ Without this tangled network of commitments gradually building up social capital, it was unlikely that a very quick housing build-up could have been achieved.¹²⁰ It went against the grain of decades of British housing culture, and it committed what Francis Castles has termed the 'fallacy' of 'invariant causes' – of seizing on one factor within a very complex system to explain Scandinavian social harmony.¹²¹

Conclusions: influence and reality in the making of economic policy

Scandinavians had a number of advantages over other experts. They usually spoke English, and they were extremely prominent in those international advisory bodies that proliferated at this time, as befitted their small-nation status and 'outward-looking' approach. The Scandinavian welfare state was

relatively generous, which appealed to the left, but was relatively contributory, which appealed to the right. Sweden's intermediate status during the Cold War, during which she was clearly identified with the West while retaining her neutrality, boosted the general appeal of the Swedish domestic model across the political spectrum, while causing most British policy-makers to reject her international stance. Norway's wartime resistance, and shared military ties with Britain given her membership of NATO, meant that she was not forgotten. Altogether, the Nordic countries made for an impressive exemplar, all the more influential thanks to the physical closeness of the nations just across the North Sea.

But this proximity and attractiveness could not guarantee that Scandinavian ideas were implemented. In areas in which Scandinavian experiences might perhaps have been central to recasting British society, for instance in wages policy or in terms of housing co-operatives, the results of 'copying' were meagre. The time was not ripe, even in the late 1950s and the 1960s, for a major realignment of British politics along Scandinavian lines – and their defeat paradoxically helped to entrench some of the less organised, more chaotic and more 'marketised' elements within British society and economy. Neither trade unions nor employers wanted the government to help them decide on prices and incomes, or central national bargaining that they believed would hold back the strongest workers and most efficient firms. The public, and even some more traditional Labour thinkers, were not ready for a wealth tax; pensions reform proved simply too complex, and too politically divisive, to emulate Swedish superannuation.

Other reasons for this disillusionment were more deeply buried in attempts to copy Nordic policies than passing disappointment with objective performance. Karen Mossberger and Hal Wolman have recently sketched what can go wrong with policy transfer in a world in which information is scarce and expensive. A single factor can be blown out of proportion in visits to 'host' countries; other countries' goals can be mistaken for one's own; policy importers can fail to assess or evaluate policy pay-offs or relative success and failure, relying rather on received wisdom; and differences in political culture and policy setting can form an insuperable barrier to success.¹²²

There were at least five main problems with this particular set of intellectual imports. Copying only what was politically useful to the government at the time – the emphasis on harnessing public and private sectors to house middle-class voters priced out of the housing market – was the first key element here. The entrenched expertise and power of the Inland Revenue on the one hand, and of local government on the other, were a second and institutional reason why no housing breakthrough occurred on the desired lines. Third, there was no central body to advocate and organise a new housing association movement. Fourth, the British system was *already* fragmented and a site of ideological disputation, a problem this plan was supposed to solve, but in reality held it back. Last, the time period over

which to yield results, crucial when testing the waters and fighting against vested interests, was far too short. The similarity of several of these points to Mossberger and Wolman's list of possible failings is obvious.

In the end, these factors added up to constant 'non-decisions': failures to go down the Scandinavian route, or to adapt existing institutional, societal and state structures to fit a new policy, perhaps at the behest of those who would prefer to limit the discussion to 'normal' or non-controversial decisions.¹²³ The weight of the past, or Marx's 'tradition of all dead generations', was simply too heavy, a key insight that historians can bring to the analysis of social policy.¹²⁴ In any case, the importance of state structures and politicians' actions – 'bringing the welfare state back in' – might be another lesson of British admiration for Scandinavia in the 1960s.¹²⁵ For groups such as CHAC's academics, the Joseph Rowntree Trust, or indeed the builders and building societies, were important policy actors in and of themselves, but the success or failure of their ideas rested on their place within the policy process, their position in relation to the state and the consequent extent to which their schemes were heard and understood in their entirety. That might be the true 'lesson' revealed in this analysis of international policy transfer.

More generally, the techniques and interpretation adopted here should alert us all the more urgently to the role of policy networks, and of gradual policy learning, both within and outside bureaucracies. The role of the United Nations, the OEEC and the OECD across a range of economic and social policy, and of the constant visits to the Nordic countries made by expert, official and political 'fact-finding missions', are further lines of inquiry that will almost certainly repay deeper study. For despite the failure of the Scandinavian ideal fundamentally to transform British politics, that example remained extremely influential – if only to demonstrate how policy-makers' best intentions had gone awry. Attempts at radical reforms to Britain's industrial structure, wages policy and housing system are only three examples of Scandinavian countries' continuing influence on British public life.

Part II

Sliding Away from Stability

4

President Kennedy, Prime Minister Macmillan and the Gold Market, 1960–63

The shape and limits of Anglo-American friendship

European models may indeed have impressed themselves deeply into the British imagination; but the USA loomed just as large as the very acme of a plentiful future.¹ Visiting Europeans gazed in wonder at the vitality, colour and above all sheer abundance of American life – expressed in the variety and colour of their cars, for example.² Even Ministry of Works domestic kitchens were sold to the public for their ‘American’ dynamism, despite their design roots in Frankfurt School modernism.³ These were also years of great hope for what clear-eyed, informed, determined and muscular liberalism could achieve in the pursuit of one overriding aim: economic growth. President Kennedy was much admired in Britain, and his young team of technocratic advisers appeared deeply impressive to a nation less than enamoured of its ever-wearier Conservative leaders.⁴ Not everyone was impressed, to be sure.⁵ Young people in Britain adapted American rock music and jukeboxes to their own tastes.⁶ Britons remained relatively immune to Americans’ passion for huge and inefficient cars, on the grounds of their own relatively austere tastes as well as how much they cost to run. Many Americans came to agree with them during their late 1950s recession.⁷

But in general the journalist Theodore White was right to sense the rise and influence of ‘a new generation of Americans ... brought up to believe, either at home or abroad, that whatever Americans wished to make happen, would happen’. What was supposed to ‘happen’ was that the American economy would bound ahead ever faster. James Tobin, who served on President Kennedy’s Council of Economic Advisers, later remembered that ‘growth was a good word, indeed *the* good word’.⁸ Ambitious politicians of both left and right looked to the American example. The autonomy and respect granted the individual in a consumerist economy had its own rational and Fabian appeal to the left.⁹ Michael Young and Tony Crosland looked to America, not just Sweden, for practical and egalitarian remedies that involved citizens as well as planners.¹⁰ A young Mrs Thatcher visited

the USA in 1967, focusing on economic affairs as befitted the Conservatives' junior Treasury spokesperson; she later recorded that 'the excitement which I felt has never really subsided'. Another visit in 1975 further entrenched her admiration, at least for free-market American policies.¹¹

Problems arose when it came to giving point and *meaning* to this 'soft power'. Anglo-American relations in the 1950s and early 1960s were by no means easy. Grave tensions arose over the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, where the British preferred to build on their commercial links and informal empire, while the Americans were keener to work with emergent nationalist groups.¹² The two countries' spectacular rupture over the Suez Crisis of 1956, during which the Americans refused to support Britain or sterling, was the eventual result. Harold Macmillan, who became Prime Minister in the wake of that debacle, had a huge task in restoring any semblance of trust to the so-called 'special relationship'.¹³ Macmillan was extremely ambivalent about the British military aid that was granted to India – under American pressure – during the Sino-Indian War of 1962.¹⁴ Economic quarrels erupted over the quotas of American oil that British and Commonwealth countries were prepared to import into the sterling area.¹⁵

Harold Macmillan worried that Kennedy's accession might make relations even worse. He was fretful that the gap in age between them would make him seem old and 'out of touch'. He worried that the younger man might consider him a conservative leftover from the nineteenth century. But in the event, the two men formed an unlikely partnership: they had, for one thing, family ties in common. Macmillan's nephew, the Marquess of Hartington, had married Kennedy's sister Kathleen before being killed in the Second World War.¹⁶ More importantly, during their first meetings at Key West in March 1961, they found they could converse on easy and straightforward terms.¹⁷ This became especially apparent after Kennedy's initial and bruising encounter with Khrushchev in Vienna during June 1961. Returning home via London, Macmillan bolstered his confidence and spirit during a long personal discussion, without advisers.¹⁸ Kennedy's monarchical 'court' matched Macmillan's presidential style, relatively novel for a British Prime Minister, rather well.¹⁹

Nuclear policy and the vexed issue of Britain's 'independent deterrent' have been exhaustively covered, particularly from the point at which post-war nuclear co-operation resumed between the two powers in 1957–58.²⁰ Here too a picture of close but uneasy co-dependency emerges. The famous conference held at Nassau in the Bahamas during December 1962 saw these issues come, acrimoniously and embarrassingly, to a head. The mood music for this meeting was appalling. Former President Truman's Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, had just given his notorious speech detailing how 'Great Britain had lost an Empire but not yet found a role' – a stinging judgement that brought forth a public Prime Ministerial rebuke.²¹ Senior officials and politicians in the State Department and at Defense did not wish the British

to continue in possession of their own nuclear weapons: George Ball and Robert McNamara, Dean Rusk's deputy at State and the Secretary for Defense respectively, were especially vocal in this respect. Only the President's own desire not to let his personal ally down, and his keen appreciation of the political difficulties in which Macmillan found himself, settled the issue. Given the Americans' poor relations with the French and Germans at the time, the British link could not be allowed to lapse. Macmillan was not above using every trick he could think of to secure his own political survival. At Nassau he cajoled, pleaded and manoeuvred, in the end threatening to break up the Anglo-American 'special relationship' entirely if he did not prevail.²²

Endless restructuring of the final draft agreement then allowed the British to retain their precious independence of action: 'supreme national interests', it finally read, might justify using the new Polaris missile system alone. Even then, a dispute about cost-sharing threatened to bring down the agreement: Macmillan's suspicions of the Americans meant that he was still prepared 'to tear up the agreement' if needs be.²³ Though Nassau ended with a deal that was acceptable on both sides, Anglo-American co-operation was hardly free of the most extreme turbulence. The Americans stood in the way of offering a nuclear 'bribe' to de Gaulle – though on several occasions they frustratingly hinted that they might help, by providing hardware if not know-how – thus allowing the French leader to veto Britain's entry into the EEC. American officials were troubled enough by the British continuing to have an independent deterrent; they recoiled at negotiating with the French, at one remove, on the terms by which they might acquire intercontinental delivery systems and high-yield payloads.²⁴ Elsewhere in the diplomatic sphere, there were long disputes over trade with Cuba, and over civil wars in Laos and Yemen. Macmillan gradually became rather disillusioned with the world as governed from Washington – though he kept most of his doubts private.²⁵

Co-operation was genuinely close in the intelligence field, albeit within certain clearly defined boundaries. Signals intelligence – the interception and decoding of global communications – was an absolutely vital and still-shadowy part of this relationship under the UKUSA Agreement of 1947.²⁶ By 1960 Britain was criss-crossed with US National Intelligence Agency 'listening stations'.²⁷ The importance of individuals' long experience of dealing with their 'partner' intelligence agencies on either side of the Atlantic was also critical. Major-General Sir Kenneth Strong, Head of the Joint Intelligence Bureau at the Ministry of Defence, was the first overseas official to be told about the discovery of Soviet missiles in Cuba during the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962. The CIA informed the incredulous British official – who had served as head of Eisenhower's Intelligence Staff during 1943 – of this development only an hour after they had told the President himself.²⁸ The British Advisory Mission in Vietnam, advising both the Americans and the South Vietnamese on counter-insurgency tactics, is

another good example of the close Anglo-American relationship in the intelligence sphere – though the limits of its influence can be seen in the fact that it opposed the American-backed coup against Ngo Dinh Diem late in 1963.²⁹ Cultural propaganda and concerted efforts to influence transatlantic opinion, including subsidising magazines, political parties and cultural events of all types, was one area of extensive hidden influence.³⁰ An entire archipelago of covert intelligence, subversion and propaganda co-operation probably remains to be uncovered, as Richard Aldrich has pointed out.³¹

The strange contradictions of economic strength

Yet it was the economy that often dominated much of the two men's thoughts – and even more of their subordinates' time. Macmillan's first official message to the new President was in fact dominated by exactly this theme, couched as ever in the language of Cold War competition:

I think the first and most important subject is what is going to happen to us unless we can show that our modern free society – the new form of capitalism – can run in a way that makes the fullest use of our resources and results in a steady expansion of our economic strength. Therefore the problem of money, the problem of its proper use in each of the Western countries, and of securing that there is sufficient credit available to keep all our countries working to the full extent of the potential available, is really the prime question of all. If we fail in this Communism will triumph, not by war, or even subversion, but by seeming to be a better way of bringing people material comforts.³²

The letter was apparently lost, only to be found in the nursery of Kennedy's three-year-old daughter.³³ Kennedy's rather non-committal response was seen as bland and disappointing when it reached London.³⁴ But its message certainly would come to seem increasingly important in the years to come, as both the American and the British economies came under internal external strains that politicians feared would lose them the 'economic race' with the communist world.

American Marshall Aid, backed up by the Organisation for European Economic Co-Operation and a European Payments Union to allow Europeans with 'soft' currencies to trade with one another, was designed to channel dollars to the Europeans and help their economies recover in a situation of acute dollar shortage throughout most of the 1950s. But the EPU had the paradoxical effect of encouraging intra-European trade and discouraging imports from the USA, while European re-equipment and success in manufacturing meant that American trade with those countries eventually faltered.³⁵ The Americans were able to pay for their purchases with the world's main reserve currency – the dollar. But US economic interventionism meant

that a shortage of dollars became a glut. Dollars poured into European treasuries via American purchases, and by now the Americans were indeed utilising what some economic historians have termed a 'gold mine of paper'. They were effectively printing their own reserve asset that they could then export to the world.³⁶

This eventually met European resistance, especially in France where a 'middle way' capitalism and special understanding with the Soviets were particularly popular ideas. European Commission officials began urging a 'realignment of currencies' on their American partners – essentially, calling for a devaluation of the dollar, even if that would happen as part of a more general realignment.³⁷ Jacques Rueff, architect of the French monetary reform of 1958 and an influential if unofficial adviser to President de Gaulle and his Finance Minister Couve de Murville, contended that the Americans were destabilising the free world's entire economic system. Rueff constantly argued for a 'return to gold', and for forcing the Americans to issue a gold guarantee for their outflow of dollars.³⁸ Both ideas were anathema in Washington, for they would have greatly undermined the Americans' ability to pay for their global aid and military spending – key tools in the struggle with the Soviet Union. They simply did not have enough gold to back up their bids for popular support. But as the share of dollar holdings in world reserves rapidly increased, the French angrily denounced the Americans' 'export of inflation'.³⁹

As the Americans and the British promoted the expansion of world liquidity to give them breathing space – and allow for continued growth – most European governments insisted 'that the United States should face up to its balance of payments problem by tightening money very severely, driving many interest rates upward far above their present level'.⁴⁰ It should be noted, however, that allowing the world to take advantage of the dollar as a rather plentiful and cheaply produced reserve asset did greatly assist growth. Certainly the global economy expanded more quickly because businesses and states did not have to resort to expensive and hard-to-find 'real' money – in this case, gold.⁴¹ The dilemma became how best to present and fight for Anglo-American expansion as a tug or leader for the rest of the West.

The British government was confronted with its own particularly cruel dilemmas, which made public support or even understanding for their stance harder to win. Not the least of these was the role of the so-called 'sterling balances' – debt denominated in sterling that was mostly held by Commonwealth countries, and which was one of the reasons why Britain's liabilities outstripped her liquid assets.⁴² Ideally, these balances and the debts they represented would have been managed downwards; and they were indeed declining as a proportion of global foreign exchange reserves.⁴³ But during the late 1950s and early 1960s, they were still rising in absolute terms. Liquidation proved more difficult than it appeared, especially as an increased use of sterling in the world economy *overall* was perceived

to be desirable. Dominions and Colonies such as Hong Kong could not be encouraged to diversify their foreign exchange holdings, for fear of damaging confidence and of causing a further outflow of sterling.⁴⁴ The sterling balances certainly did not cause or explain British politicians' preference for the pound to remain as a reserve currency; great power considerations, prestige and the influence of the City of London were far more decisive. But these balances were one among many elements that made for an imbalance between the country's income and her debt liabilities.⁴⁵

The result was recurring sterling crises as investors lost faith in the pound's value, restored to full convertibility against other currencies at the end of 1958.⁴⁶ This was exacerbated by sterling's very role as a reserve currency, and London's central place in the world financial system. Short-term deposits held in London for just these reasons could evaporate very quickly. As one Bank of England official put it, 'however much we dislike hot money, we cannot be international bankers and refuse to accept money'.⁴⁷ When the Treasury Under-Secretary Robert Roosa visited London in summer 1962, he was informed of the foreign exchange markets that 'it did not take much to make them excited'. 'The underlying tone of the exchange markets', wrote the Bank of England at this time, 'is one of nervousness and lack of confidence. This probably rests mainly on uncertainty regarding the dollar which is generally weak.'⁴⁸ The Treasury similarly despaired that the 'attention paid to them [gold and currency reserves] was excessive and ... indicative of a prurient or morbid interest'.⁴⁹ At the same time, political discourse concerning the economy became more and more focused around the idea of the pound as a totem of economic strength – especially as the Conservatives insisted on emphasising the 'weakness' of Labour's sterling devaluation and the advantages of Britain's status as 'banker to the world'.⁵⁰ The risks of this strategy became increasingly apparent as the currency came under strain.

The worst of these crises to occur under Macmillan arose in July 1961, following an upwards revision of the Deutschmark's value that creditors thought not large enough to right the British and American disadvantage.⁵¹ Britain had to borrow \$1.5bn from the International Monetary Fund, and secure another \$500m in 'stand-by' arrangements that she could draw down if she needed them. Further standby agreements were settled in 1962.⁵² The Americans were caught, for they could not simply let sterling collapse: the dollar would be next. On the other hand, the USA would be lending \$450m as its share of the IMF loan, and these dollars might 'leak' across Europe if the British used them there.⁵³ This would further increase the strain on the gold price. It was eventually agreed that the Americans would receive \$150m back from the IMF, lowering their exposure; but the US Treasury was still not content. Although they felt the Bank of England and in particular Lord Cromer was 'more friendly to the USA and has more understanding of our position than most other British officials', British use of the loans in general troubled Washington nearly as much as the specifics of how the money

would be spent.⁵⁴ Douglas Dillon, Kennedy's Secretary of the Treasury, wrote unhappily:

The United Kingdom has not maintained an adequate competitive position and in fact has steadily lost ground as an exporter relative to other industrial countries. This is partly due to strong domestic demand which has diverted production from the export field ... another cause has been wage increases which have outstripped productivity ... the United Kingdom has been slow to shift out of older and weaker export industries ... After so many years of repeated British faltering in their efforts to find a proper balance between investment, domestic consumption, and exports, the observing world is likely to observe a 'wait and see' attitude.⁵⁵

The loan also allowed the French to again pose as exemplars of monetary virtue: the French Minister of Finance told Dillon in May 1961 that any IMF loan 'might involve some lowering of Fund standards and thereby encourage unnecessary inflation'.⁵⁶

Gold, sterling and the dollar: foreign policy dilemmas

There was no question of any general shortage of gold pushing up the price of the world's main reserve asset. World gold production was moving ever upwards, surging towards a mid-1960s peak that would only be surpassed during the 1980s.⁵⁷ Gold continued to supply increasing amounts, in absolute terms, of world reserve assets.⁵⁸ But the increases of gold in actual circulation were slowing, as the US outflow caused by lack of confidence in the dollar was soaked up by private hoarding and by other Central Banks' reserves.⁵⁹ Sources of new gold were politically troublesome, for they would involve trade with two of the world's greatest gold producers: South Africa and the Soviet Union.⁶⁰ Devaluation, which would of course increase the price of gold, would give those powers an unwelcome boost. As Kennedy's Special Advisor, Carl Kaysen, put it in July 1962: 'we [would] combine giving advantages to the Soviets and the South Africans with increasing our own and Canadian production of something we don't really need'.⁶¹

A particular problem for the British was the fact that the sterling area did not produce enough gold to meet its dollar liabilities – especially as the Australians, from 1951 onwards, preferred to use their own gold production to build up a new bank of national reserves.⁶² The British Treasury and the Bank of England had long helped the South Africans meet their foreign exchange requirements in London by buying South African gold and then trading it on.⁶³ They feared that otherwise a separate, unofficial and 'destabilising' independent South African gold market might emerge.⁶⁴ But by 1963–64 this situation was coming under increasing strain, partly because the South Africans were pressing hard for an increase in the price of gold

that would benefit them, but would undermine the whole thrust of Anglo-American efforts.⁶⁵ But the main source of tension was caused by the racist Apartheid policies of the South African government and its international unpopularity. A United Nations Expert Committee was by now looking into the effects of economic sanctions.⁶⁶ The Treasury was very reluctantly making advance preparations for a sterling area without South African gold.⁶⁷ Both the British and the Americans accepted that this 'consideration ... might have to be faced' as early as 1970.⁶⁸

Eastern bloc gold was another problem. A Soviet wheat purchase was already causing quite enough controversy in Washington during 1963.⁶⁹ Kennedy accepted privately that the deal was 'a political liability'.⁷⁰ Although Galbraith for one was prepared to urge more trade with the Soviet bloc, the question remained a very difficult one for Downing Street and the White House.⁷¹ For one thing, it seemed to suggest that the Soviets had large gold reserves that they could spend on importing food – £80m of gold sales having occurred in 1963 alone. Though Galbraith dismissed 'the nonsense about vast Russian gold reserves', the propaganda effect of the Soviets' obvious buying power was unwelcome.⁷² British intelligence sources estimated that the USSR's gold reserves might sustain that outflow for four years, should her harvests continue to be disappointing. But the discovery of new gold fields might let the Russians add a further 25 per cent to their gold holdings over the next five years.⁷³

These twin crises of confidence had less to do with the real economic situation than at first appeared.⁷⁴ Figures 4.1 and 4.2 make this point vividly: neither country in fact ran a sustained *private sector* balance of payments deficit until the 1970s. Britain was usually in balance, her 'visible' trade deficits usually covered by her 'invisible' earnings from the City of London and from foreign investments. The periodic sterling crises showed how *unusual* the opposite situation was, not how intractable.⁷⁵ The United States current account surplus was over \$1bn in 1962, and rose strongly well into 1964. There was no trade imbalance at all until 1968, and none on physical or 'merchandise' goods until 1971.⁷⁶ And both the UK and US deficits should be explained by reference, not to their exports and imports, but to government spending abroad, most notably on the two countries' vast military commitments. Even in 1960, the USA exported \$4.8bn more in goods and services than it imported. It was only \$4.2bn of foreign military spending and aid expenditure, along with long-term capital outflows, that explained the country's 'deficit'.⁷⁷

It is true that both countries' trading position was declining. Both countries' costs rose faster than those of competitors, a fact which the Bank of England continuously pointed out to ministers.⁷⁸ Britain's trade with those countries holding sterling balances did not grow as much as policy-makers hoped, even as outward investment into the sterling area increased in the late 1950s and early 1960s.⁷⁹ But these economies, in particular the British,

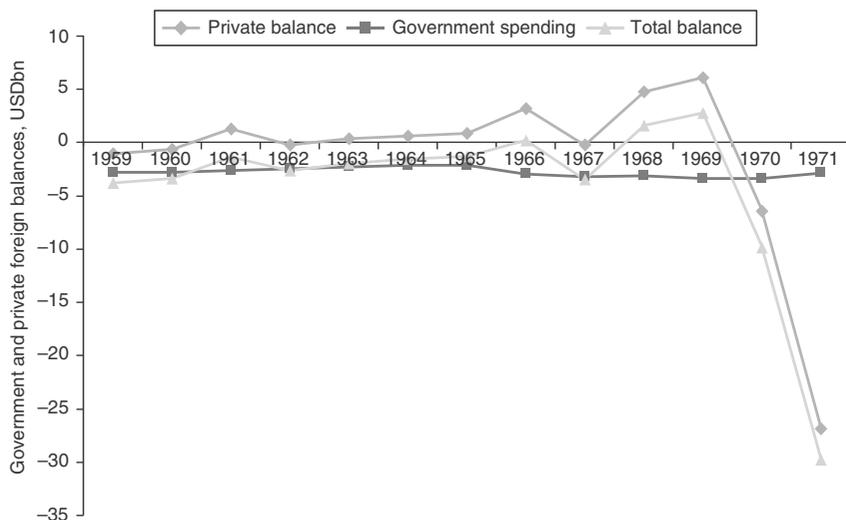


Figure 4.1 US balance of payments under Bretton Woods convertibility, 1959–71

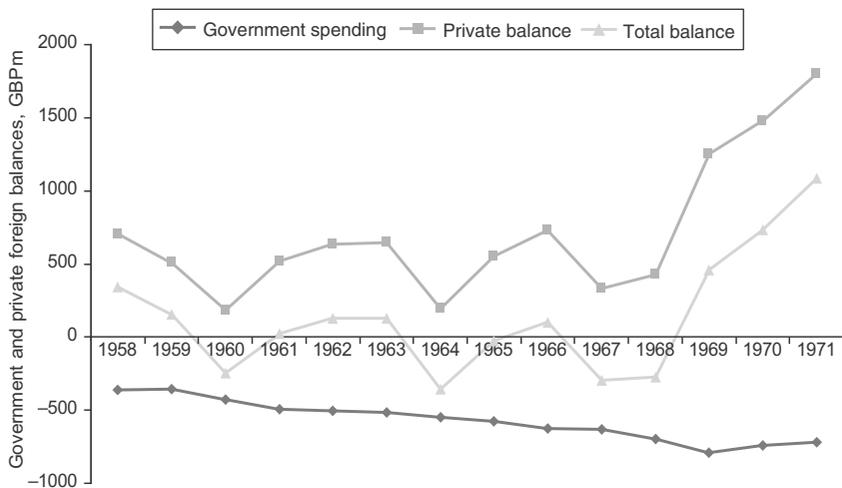


Figure 4.2 UK balance of payments under Bretton Woods convertibility, 1959–71
Sources: V. Argy, *The Postwar International Money Crisis: An Analysis* (1981), table 3.1, p. 32, table 3.3, p. 34, table 3.4, p. 38, and table 3.6, p. 41; J.H.B. Tew, 'Politics Aimed at Improving the Balance of Payments', in F.T. Blackaby (ed.), *British Economic Policy 1960–74: Demand Management*, Cambridge University Press, 1978, table 7.1. p. 305.

did not stand in the position that voters were told that they did. Pamphlets and broadcasts continuously issued from Whitehall extolling the virtues of ever-greater effort and sacrifice on the part of the populace to support the balance of payments.⁸⁰ But the solution to the macroeconomic problem remained even more startlingly obvious: cutting net defence spending abroad would secure the position of both the dollar and sterling. The idea was easier to recommend in principle than practice.

President Kennedy's battle to avoid devaluation

By the time Kennedy took power in 1961, radical economists were beginning to suggest a 'rise in the dollar value of gold' – economists' code for devaluing the dollar – since it had lost some of its international purchasing power, but even more importantly, because holding the currency's dollar peg was holding back growth. Radical Keynesians such as Roy Harrod wrote publicly that this was a lesser evil than accentuating Western weakness in the face of the Soviet threat: 'a shortage of liquidity has prevented one free country after another from adopting a policy of economic expansion. Growth rates have been disappointing in most of the free countries, a point that cannot fail to be noted by detached observers.'⁸¹ The Democratic Party, and many of his own confidantes, did indeed expect him to 'go for growth'.

The President was wise enough to surround himself with some of the pre-eminent Keynesian thinkers of the time – initially Paul Samuelson of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), whose influence was later supplemented by that of Walter Heller from Minnesota. But cutting taxes and boosting federal spending might imperil both the balance of payments and stable prices – a case pressed on him by Dillon, Roosa and Chairman Martin from the Federal Reserve.⁸² The Kennedy administration was divided between the expansionists on the one hand, led by Heller, and the traditionalists, represented most forcefully by Dillon and Martin.⁸³ Only later in his brief Presidency, in the winter of 1962–63, would a slightly more confident Kennedy feel able to emphasise expansion, employment and government action, rather than relatively orthodox financial management.⁸⁴ The passage of tax credits and other incentives for business investment during 1962 seemed to be having an effect; the external balance of payments was improving; and his Republican opponents appeared politically weaker, as well as being divided as to whether tax cuts were a good idea.⁸⁵

Kennedy had won the 1960 election as the 'growth candidate', arguing that renewed economic progress was 'the number one problem which the next President of the United States will have to meet'.⁸⁶ But George Ball, Under-Secretary of State for Economic Affairs at the State Department, remembered later that Kennedy also possessed a 'brooding concern with the problem of our depleting gold reserves', amounting almost to an 'obsession'. Ball ascribed that view to Kennedy's 'inherently conservative' father.⁸⁷

Richard Nixon, the Democrats' Republican opponent, forced Kennedy into a public commitment to the dollar's value during the election campaign when gold briefly hit \$40 an ounce: Kennedy then made sure that the issue was on the agenda for his transition talks with President Eisenhower.⁸⁸ He told his aides that devaluation was out of the question: 'he did not want that weapon of last resort even mentioned outside his office'. As Kennedy told Sorensen:

I know everyone else thinks I worry about this too much ... But if there's ever a run on the bank, and I have to devalue the dollar or bring home our troops, as the British did, I'm the one who will take the heat. Besides, it's a club that De Gaulle and all the others hang over my head. Any time there's a crisis or a quarrel, they can cash in all their dollars and where are we?⁸⁹

Kennedy also knew that any Cold War crisis – especially over Berlin – would make the situation immeasurably worse. Moving six divisions to West Germany would cost \$350m in the first year of their deployment, and \$760m in the second.⁹⁰ Walt Rostow recalled that 'he [Kennedy] hated de Gaulle's having a whip hand over him – getting our protection free; hurting us whenever he could; and piling up a gold surplus at our expense, via our NATO outlays in France'.⁹¹

This 'obsession' explained many of the President's acts while in power. Very early in the life of his administration, he asked his officials for a comprehensive 'plan' to right the balance of payments deficit. Secretary Dillon was reporting on a 14-point programme within two months of the Democrats winning back the White House. These involved the prohibition of foreign gold holdings by all Americans, private citizens as well as companies; more vigorous trade and tourism promotion; generous help for exporters through the American Export-Import Bank; an attack on tax havens; more multilateral, rather than unilateral US, help for developing countries, 'tying' aid to trade; and efficiencies on military spending abroad.⁹² Even more critically for our purposes, Roosa set up a special committee to look into 'measures to improve international monetary institutions'. Kennedy was determined to close America's trade gap; but he also wanted to make clear that he wanted greater international support for the dollar if American military and aid spending was to continue.⁹³ The problem was how to combine these relatively expansionist measures with maintaining the low interest rates that generally prevailed in the post-war world. The Federal Reserve stepped up its purchases of government debt – commenced under Eisenhower – to help take the pressure off interest rates.⁹⁴ Initial reactions to Kennedy's first moves were favourable, and a hopeful atmosphere prevailed in Washington. Dillon told the British in February 1961 that he 'thought there was a good chance the US could approach equilibrium with respect

to the basic deficit in three to four years'.⁹⁵ Even Galbraith referred to the gold situation as 'stable' in March. Bond yields generally held steady, and the gold drain lessened.⁹⁶

But net gold sales began to pick up again during the summer, reflecting perhaps the end of Kennedy's electoral honeymoon with the financial markets. The overall balance of payments deficit began to balloon again in the autumn – from zero (on an annual basis) during the first half of the year, to a projected \$2–2.5bn in the second six months of 1961.⁹⁷ There was still some hope of moving into surplus during 1962.⁹⁸ But during Cabinet meetings late that same year, Treasury and State officials became more and more gloomy about the outlook, mainly because projections of the United States position *vis-à-vis* traded goods were deteriorating.⁹⁹ By mid-1963 informed observers were predicting increases, not reductions, in the overall balance of payments deficit.¹⁰⁰

Concert and conflict in Anglo-American financial diplomacy

The British had long accepted, in principle at least, that an upwards revision in the price of gold might be desirable. They had been privately open to the idea since at least 1955, and even the Bank of England thought this solution better than defending the present gold price at all costs.¹⁰¹ Macmillan remained privately very dubious about the Bretton Woods currency system as it stood, and his radical reviews about expanding world liquidity caused worries in the State Department.¹⁰² When Selwyn Lloyd informed him that Rueff's policies would inevitably lead to a rise in the price of gold, he minuted back that 'yes – but everyone also knows that this is the sensible answer'.¹⁰³ He 'got into disgrace', in his own words, for suggesting just this – and 'a central banking system for all the countries of the free world' – to the Americans during an April 1961 speech at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.¹⁰⁴ 'I want to go the whole way,' he wrote later that year: 'I would like a World Bank. I would like to double the value of gold and thereby produce an enormous increase in the basis of credit.'¹⁰⁵ His view was the exact opposite of the Bank of England's, for as Lord Cobbold wrote to Macmillan at the time: 'a far more likely remedy is to force a greater share of our "cake" away from consumption and towards savings and investment ... The urgency of exports has been stressed again and again. We must keep at it.'¹⁰⁶ Macmillan was often privately very dubious about American power *per se*, and he became more so as his period in No. 10 wore on. Although he could not embark on any great reform of the global currency system without the USA, he was inclined to ignore much of Cobbold's advice as playing by 'American' rules.

Two problems arose with Macmillan's stance, above and beyond highly orthodox Bank of England advice that he was able to dismiss. These rendered the Prime Minister's private radicalism unworkable. The first was

that no general currency realignment 'could take place overnight without damage to confidence in the reserve currencies'. The second problem was that President Kennedy had placed so much political store in the dollar's value. Macmillan was advised not to mention the question in his talks with Kennedy at the end of 1962. 'Any suggestion to the Administration that they should think again', advised the Treasury, 'would only cause resentment, would be damaging to relations with the United States, and would be most unlikely to be fruitful.'¹⁰⁷ Washington long suspected that confidence-sapping leaks were emanating from London – Dillon referred to them getting 'a taste of their own medicine' when they had to defend sterling in July 1962 – and took any suggestion of devaluation very badly indeed.¹⁰⁸ British efforts were therefore bent to making the best of the US insistence that an ounce of gold should be worth \$35.

Given that decision to play by 'the rules of the game', constant tension arose over interest rates. The Americans contended that some of the gold outflow from New York to London was caused by the higher interest rates that were then prevalent in the UK.¹⁰⁹ The Bank of England continually attempted to convince their colleagues in American banking that the outflow was much stronger towards continental Europe, but to little avail.¹¹⁰ The problem arose because the American economy generally required lower interest rates in these years, while the pressure in the more inflationary UK was upwards. Frank Lee pointed out the problem of 'great differences in various domestic economies', whereby 'the UK problem was one of excessive demand, [for] the US the contrary', in February 1961.¹¹¹ This did not stop the Americans doing everything they could to stop the British – and the Canadians – raising interest rates, putting pressure on the American dollar while the USA maintained lower rates, and exacerbating the gold and dollar drain.¹¹² President Johnson, Heller and even Roosa again put pressure on the British to mediate their interest rate rises in January and February 1964.¹¹³

These tensions were nowhere near as acute as those that arose with the French and Germans. Ball, for one, 'resented the sanctimonious, school-masterish scolding of European bankers, since our deficits resulted in part because we were carrying an inordinate share of the Free World's defence'. Heller, Tobin, Kaysen and Ball urged the creation of greater liquidity, and higher defences for the dollar, in a long memorandum to the President in July 1962.¹¹⁴ Ball sent a long memorandum to Kennedy in August 1962, asking him to consider a 'fresh approach to the gold problem'. 'Multilateralizing' new liquidity was the key, Ball argued: a fresh appeal to the EEC powers as a whole might be fruitful, he contended, for 'central bankers may regard our expenditures to defend the Free World as a sin, but the political leaders of our Western allies do not'. Dillon and the Treasury, orthodox to a fault, stalled such an initiative by arguing that the State Department should try to pool defence costs before they considered changing the whole basis of the world economy.¹¹⁵

De Gaulle was, however, determined not to help the Americans extend their political and military dominance in Europe. He rejected the idea of nuclear co-operation with the British and Americans during the same January 1963 press conference he used to veto British entry into the EEC. He then proceeded to arrange a treaty with the West Germans that threatened to wrest the economic and monetary leadership of the continent from the Anglo-Saxons.¹¹⁶ By this stage some very radical plans were under discussion in Washington, as the President's patience was tested to its limits. Rostow, by now at the State Department, proposed capital controls on American investment in other developed nations; all military expenditure within NATO being 'offset' or paid back to the USA 'in principle', and 'special rules' in the IMF and the G10 'covering the responsibilities to the international community of chronic deficit and surplus countries'. Though there 'was no need to press the panic button', and given American political and economic strength they had 'three to five years' to transform the way the world economy worked, Rostow asked simply: 'what are the duties of an ally?' If the French refused to co-operate, 'our hands would be freed – and our consciences – to take whatever steps we felt unilaterally required'.¹¹⁷ The Treasury once again violently disagreed, arguing that such measures would reduce the USA to the status of a 'Brazil or an Argentina'.¹¹⁸

Despite a long report prepared for Kennedy by Acheson, urging a multilateral support operation to tide the dollar over until a trade surplus was achieved, Kennedy settled on large-scale reductions in US conventional forces in Europe. It appears that both the President and his Secretary of Defense were convinced that nuclear deterrence in that theatre would be both more effective and cheaper than an open-ended commitment to keeping their tanks and infantry on the Rhine. McNamara at Defense, obsessed as ever with gaining 'efficiency' for his department's expenditure, sided with the latter. 'Big Lift', an exercise designed to show how the USA could quickly move six divisions to Europe mounted in autumn 1963, was designed to put further pressure on the Europeans, and to prepare the way for a total reappraisal of American troop numbers on that continent.¹¹⁹

Some of Ball and Rostow's ideas were acted upon. 'Offset' negotiations with the Germans had begun in the last months of the Eisenhower administration, though they progressed only 'very slowly' during the first half of 1961.¹²⁰ The need to reach an agreement was critical, for once again the Americans' *traded* balance of payment with the Germans was in enormous surplus. That figure ran at \$677m in 1961, and only American and British military spending in that country tipped the balance the other way. Washington and London felt that this underlying reality ought to be given much more weight in the debates about their balance of payments 'deficits'.¹²¹ Macmillan himself wrote to Konrad Adenauer, the German Chancellor, to urge action on the country's trade surplus. Adenauer is supposed to have thrown up his hands and exclaimed 'Balance of Payments, it is always Balance of Payments!'¹²²

Only the intensification of the Berlin crisis in the summer of that year gave the Americans enough leverage to persuade the Germans to reach a deal under which the Germans would buy American arms and matériel matching 80 per cent of US spending in the Federal Republic.¹²³ This was not, however, perceived in Bonn as a permanent agreement: more as a temporary expedient to reduce American pressure.¹²⁴ It might come to an end when another of the Americans' projects – modernising Europe's defences against the Red Army – came to a close.¹²⁵ When the time came to extend the deal, Adenauer was only just able to continue its life over his Treasury ministers' objections; the Germans were usually late with their offset payments, and refused to commit themselves to spending more than \$1bn in 1963 or 1964. US troop costs in Germany were at this stage running at \$1.35bn.¹²⁶

Technocratic action: American defences and the gold pool

In autumn 1960, as the Presidential election began in earnest, speculation about a possible devaluation caused the British to sell \$30m worth of their own gold, 'earmarking' or buying on account more in New York, to prevent a matching influx of dollars in London. They hoped that this would help still the turmoil in the markets, and the Bank of England's operations did indeed 'succeed ... in stopping the recent hectic rise in the price of gold' – but the situation remained delicate.¹²⁷ The Bank then enquired in Washington as to the wisdom of a longer-term arrangement. The Americans initially demurred, wishing to keep their destiny in their own hands: there was an embarrassing meeting between Maudling, Cobbold and US Treasury officials during September, during which the Americans asked the British to desist. The Americans feared political controversy if it became public that the British were buying gold in New York and selling it on at a profit in London – whatever the support given to the dollar. The Bank of England was by this point making it clear that it did not want to proceed further without American backing.¹²⁸ The US Treasury mounted its own forward-selling operations of continental currencies instead.¹²⁹

But by October 1960 further worries about the dollar's value forced the Americans' hand. The Treasury civil servant Maurice Parsons visited Washington and, 'by his candour and his mastery of the subject', was able to convince the Americans that more co-operation was needed.¹³⁰ A collaborative scheme would, for one thing, mean that it was not only American gold that was being sold to 'hoarders' in London – the source of the Americans' political worries in the first place.¹³¹ The British had to accept a limit to their 'earmarking' of gold in New York gold.¹³² But the eventual result was a 'gold pool' – a syndicate of Central Banks, led by the Americans under terms drawn up by the New York Federal Reserve, who were willing to buy up gold when its price was low, and sell it while its price went up. This would help to stabilise the price of gold and take pressure off sterling and the dollar.¹³³

The 'pool' was agreed at a long central bankers' meeting in Basle during November 1961, and came fully into operation during March of the following year.¹³⁴ It initially bought up gold to increase its potential influence and to counteract Soviet gold sales. But strong downwards pressure on the dollar, occasioned by what the UK Treasury called 'continuing talk – official even more than unofficial – about the American balance of payments deficit' – soon caused the syndicate to sell heavily. By mid-July its gold holdings had fallen from a peak of \$70m to \$26m; the Bank of England alone sold \$20m on a single day that month.¹³⁵ Central Bank governors therefore agreed to extend the 'pool', though not without a number pointing out that 'the original idea of the sales consortium was to meet an emergency and not to cover the general deficit of the US balance of payments'.¹³⁶ British officials were also uneasy about this settlement, for in essence it meant that 'the European central banks agree to hold rather more dollars than they would otherwise have done' – an implicit agreement to keep helping should the system not work, which was bound to cause conflict in the future should the Americans continue to run a balance of payments deficit. In the end the USA would be faced with the choice of whether or not to issue a gold guarantee for dollar holdings – something the British could never afford for sterling.¹³⁷ In the event, the arrangement was saved by the flood of gold coming onto the world market, and the 'pool' members ended up net purchasers of the precious metal up to 1965. Their shared reserves boomed; the strain on the dollar lessened a little.¹³⁸

In the meantime, a whole rash of reports and inquiries were published and launched, most of which called for an expansion of world liquidity through the creation of new currency assets. The most radical plans called for a true world Central Bank, a variation of the World Clearing Union and the 'Bancor' international currency Keynes had wanted after the Second World War.¹³⁹ The Belgian economist Robert Triffin was responsible for the most famous version of these plans, calling in 1960 for 'the internationalization of foreign exchange reserves under the aegis of the International Monetary Fund'.¹⁴⁰ But the Americans, especially Dillon, at first took a very conservative attitude towards these proposals.¹⁴¹ The British also initially 'took a very strong position in opposition to any and all proposals of the type put forward by Professor Triffin', for instance during the Treasury and Bank visit to Washington that paved the way for the 1961 IMF loan.¹⁴² In this respect they went further than many American officials, to the delight of Dillon and Roosa, who wanted 'ammunition to knock down "Triffinism"' and defeat their more expansionist colleagues.¹⁴³

UK Treasury opposition to new ideas arose from their worry that the world banking authority and its new currency would hardly reduce the outflow of gold and dollars. Indeed, the implicit guarantee that the new currency would involve – backed by all developed nations – might make the pound and the dollar look even more exposed. It was exactly the point that worried officials

on both sides of the Atlantic about the gold pool's implications.¹⁴⁴ But the Bank of England was also particularly concerned that countries should not be able to draw on liquid assets out of all proportion to their contributions and voting rights: 'the retreat to anarchy', one official at the Bank called the idea.¹⁴⁵ The two sides agreed to pursue reform of the IMF instead.¹⁴⁶

IMF reform was agreed, at least in principle, at Vienna in September 1961. More than \$6bn was promised to right the payments system's imbalances via the so-called 'G10' group made up of the ten developed countries willing to pool their resources.¹⁴⁷ But long wrangles still ensued about the conditions for drawing down this new liquidity, a key element in convincing the Americans that the British had been right all along about the 'unwisdom and futility' of a general and automatic solution. Fund managers, especially Per Jacobsson, its President, feared undermining the IMF's neutrality and impartiality, and insisted that 'existing sensible policies' would be enough.¹⁴⁸ The Europeans, especially the French, wanted a veto as to when the 'surplus' countries could be asked for new contributions.¹⁴⁹ Jacobsson took the general view that, if the Americans and the British could be persuaded onto a less reckless and inflationary course, case-by-case agreements might be reached which would remove the need for a general or automatic deal.¹⁵⁰

Pending wider reforms, Roosa constructed an elaborate web of defences to add to the emerging gold pool. He issued 'Roosa bonds' – US securities denominated in different countries' own currencies rather than in gold. Roosa also suggested, more ambitiously, that different countries hold each other's currencies, so as to be able to supply them rapidly to any point of crisis, as well as applying pressure to agree currency 'swaps' if no mutual holdings could be agreed. The latter had been extremely useful to London during the 1961 sterling crisis.¹⁵¹ But the British were less than impressed about relying on this idea in the medium term, as private Treasury correspondence reveals.¹⁵² Senior officials at the Bank, too, thought that these initiatives were just a 'skilful deployment of American tactical strength in defence of a weakening strategic position'. In Threadneedle Street, the USA was thought to be acting in 'a tactically obscure and play-for-time manner ... This looks very near the end of a road. The Americans wouldn't make hints of this kind unless they were beginning to lose hope of their deficit righting itself.'¹⁵³ Douglas Allen and Lucius Thompson-McCausland, sent from the Treasury and the Bank of England to negotiate with the Americans in a joint working party, were very doubtful about the whole initiative. The Bank felt 'forced by the Americans into a corner', but realised that the main alternative was impracticable. The USA simply could not make a massive drawing on the IMF (while still holding many billions of dollars in reserve) without distorting the whole basis of the Fund. The IMF had been designed to help debtor countries adjust their financial circumstances to passing problems. It was not supposed to fund the world's most powerful nation – a 'solution' most Europeans would resist.¹⁵⁴

The British agreed to take \$50m of Roosa's 'swaps' in early 1962, 'to show goodwill', but resisted pressure to go further.¹⁵⁵ British officials believed that 'this is a slippery slope leading to larger holdings of dollars in our reserves', and suggested 'multilateralising of the swap network' – a natural concomitant to expansions of general liquidity.¹⁵⁶ They feared being shackled to a further \$300m in dollar debts that could be cashed 'when the ability of the United States to maintain the official gold price was under suspicion', an occasion when 'we would not want to forgo the potential profit accruing from our normal gold holding policy'. The Americans were offered private assurances of help in the event of a dollar crisis instead.¹⁵⁷ 'We must not be caught with dollars when we might have gold,' Macmillan insisted – showing once more his private adherence to a rather more independent British line than he revealed in public.¹⁵⁸

The British now put forward what inevitably became known after Britain's Chancellor as the 'Maudling Plan', under which a Mutual Currency Account of swaps and bonds would be established, and on which countries could draw. The European Six were relatively sceptical about the idea, partly because it was presented in a rather vague manner, but also because there would be no time limit on drawings, and so no 'quarantine' on American and British borrowing and inflation.¹⁵⁹ The Americans, too, were 'not encouraging' in discussions of the Maudling Plan. They believed that a Mutual Currency Account 'would not do anything that the IMF could not do with far less trouble'.¹⁶⁰ More seriously, it would involve an implicit pledge that other countries could redeem money they lodged in the MCA – exactly that guarantee of dollar holdings the Americans could and would not give.¹⁶¹ Roosa condemned the idea in print before Maudling had even officially announced it.¹⁶² When the Anglo-American working party addressed Maudling's plan in a March 1963 report, and despite general agreement that new international credit instruments were required, its report recorded more divisions than conclusions. The Americans believed that deposits in the MCA would further undermine confidence in the dollar.¹⁶³ The Maudling Plan's general reception was 'cool', and the British proposals were not re-tabled later in the year.¹⁶⁴

All this formed the backdrop to a reappraisal of Britain's prior refusal to enter into a standby and swaps agreement for \$500m – twice the amount that any other nation held in US dollars. This was partly because officials, especially at the Bank, were able to insist that this would mark the 'absolute upper limit' of currency holdings in UK reserves; it would stop the country being dragged into embarrassing commitments, not speed her along that course. But the policy reversal was also due to the relative failure of the Maudling initiative. As the world economy speeded up again, and the US balance of payments once more yawned alarmingly wide, there seemed little alternative.¹⁶⁵ The UK balance of payments must inevitably come under strain given Maudling's new 'dash for growth' during 1963. The situation that

prevailed in 1962 had been reversed: Maudling was now publicly committed to Britain drawing from the IMF to finance investment, rather than deflating.¹⁶⁶ Any new source of credit would now be more likely to help Britain as she ran into payments problems than it would aid the Americans.¹⁶⁷

Conclusions: destabilising progress

The world became ever more complex than it had seemed at the time of the Bretton Woods settlement, and the speed of economic change and growth meant that the system was becoming paradoxically harder to manage with each success – restoring convertibility, increasing trade, boosting growth. Secretary Dillon put his finger on the heart of the matter in a long memorandum to the President in August 1962:

What had gone wrong [he asked]? The conspicuous answer lay in the complex forces responsible for the large and continuing deficits in the United States balance of payments. But the underlying answer was paradoxically simple: progress – progress that had brought convertibility to the current transactions among most of the leading industrial countries; progress that had restored balance of payments strength or surplus to most of the same countries; and progress that had achieved ample liquidity in terms of dollars ... It was progress that had outrun the political capability for directing it as well as the financial facilities available to serve it.¹⁶⁸

These chronic problems had caused a critical imbalance in international and national political systems, with national governments struggling to retain credibility and ‘political capability’ at home, and the two main powers in terms of defence and aid spending unable to stabilise their own currencies or to ensure that other powers would help them. As the Bank of England noted late in 1962, ‘there is no technical difficulty in using the Fund to generate [more liquidity]. The essential problem is the political one of reaching agreement between deficit and surplus countries that there is a need.’¹⁶⁹ Without such an arrangement, any technical solution was bound to be the subject of endless manoeuvring for position. The conditions for utilising tranches of Fund gold were a particular matter of dispute all the way through to the end of 1963. The Dutch and the French, and to some extent the British as well, objected to giving the Fund’s Director executive powers to speed up this process.¹⁷⁰ Overall, as the British Treasury noted, ‘the process of negotiation has revealed the shift of power to Europe and the decisive part that at present the European countries can play’.¹⁷¹

By the end of 1963, the French were pressing for an entirely new reserve currency, the Currency Reserve Unit (CRU), which would be linked to gold. Rueff and de Gaulle’s design, to constrain the Anglo-Saxon powers’

spending and influence, would thus be complete.¹⁷² The situation seemed intractable. In August 1963 Maudling asked his officials what was likely to happen if the French forced the dollar into inconvertibility by presenting a massive demand for gold. They still thought this idea far-fetched ('a "rallying round" the dollar [is] more likely', they wrote), but prepared notes for a 'package deal' in that eventuality.¹⁷³ The Americans were able to forestall the French proposal within the G10 group that considered the CRU – but only on the basis that the American deficit was being reduced, and would continue to shrink.¹⁷⁴ If the US deficit came indeed to be seen as intractable, then the Europeans' current patience might snap altogether.

There is no doubt whatever that the Bretton Woods system spread certainty and stability: the economic 'golden age' of the 1950s and 1960s depended in part on the freedom to trade and invest with confidence. The problem was that the multidimensional system of equal currencies imagined in 1944–45 had morphed into a dollar system that bore more than a passing likeness to the old gold standard. When that currency faltered, the system sagged.¹⁷⁵ The ever more complex and multifarious reform 'solutions' themselves begged the question: why make the effort? A small but growing minority of economists, including Triffin but also Fritz Machlup of Princeton and William Fellner, were beginning to call for more flexible – even floating – exchange rates. They organised a series of conferences during 1964, and even published a rival report to the IMF's on the same day as the Fund's annual report. Their hand would strengthen in the years to come.¹⁷⁶ By the time Kennedy and Macmillan had been replaced by President Lyndon Johnson and Alec Douglas-Home in Downing Street the entire system was shrouded in doubt, for the two countries' attempts to maintain their economic power seemed to be turning feet of clay to feet of sand. As Galbraith himself once told the President, 'the economist's magic is sadly limited'.¹⁷⁷

5

President Johnson, Prime Minister Wilson and the Slow Collapse of Equilibrium, 1964–68

Moving on from ‘secret’ histories

Historians’ views of the transatlantic financial diplomacy of the later 1960s have been dominated by the idea of a secret deal made between President Lyndon Johnson and Prime Minister Harold Wilson in 1965, trading US financial help for a continuation of Britain’s world defence role. This notion has become extremely widespread, often taken for granted in historical writing.¹ There was a high level of co-operation between the two men: as a number of writers have made clear, Wilson and Johnson shared a number of unspoken objectives which may have tied the interests of the two leaders together without any formal pact.² However, the difficulty with arguments focusing on their ‘deal’ is that such work often underestimates the extent to which the British were able to manipulate the relationship to their own ends, given that the Americans still required British help, and needed therefore to support Britain, in a number of fields – diplomatic, economic and military.

This emphasis on a secret transatlantic accord is part of a wider critique of the Wilson governments: that they unquestioningly carried on playing by the ‘rules of the game’ laid down in traditional British foreign policy, including dependence on the USA.³ In political science terms, this critique emphasises ‘accommodation’, ‘incrementalism’ and ‘continuity’ within the British political elite: the liberal world trade and payments system had to be protected as a key interest for a trading nation with a declining currency, and the best way to carry this out was an association with the USA as the country with what the economist Susan Strange once termed the ‘top currency’.⁴

These arguments echo the suspicions of the contemporary left, including some of the members of Wilson’s own Cabinet.⁵ In his diary, the left-wing Cabinet Minister Richard Crossman constantly returned to his dislike of the Bevinite ‘gamble’ of attempting to ‘recreate the Anglo-American axis’, a strategy to which he thought the Prime Minister too committed,

allied to the 'fantastic illusion' of maintaining British military power east of Suez which was 'solely the PM's line'.⁶ Wilson's own economic adviser, Thomas Balogh, continually bemoaned American pressure for a deflation which might cause the whole economy to 'cascade' downwards.⁷ The idea of a 'deal' went far beyond the left: George Brown, Secretary of State for Economic Affairs and on the right of the party, argued that the deflationary measures of July 1966 had been prompted by the fact that Wilson was 'too deeply committed to Johnson. God knows what he has said to him.'⁸ Wilson's Chief Whip, Edward Short, thought that such an agreement had been sealed before Labour even took office; the newspaper magnate Cecil King thought that the British had agreed to take no 'drastic action' on their global military role or the pound at least until the American Congressional elections of November 1966.⁹

Both Wilson and Callaghan have denied the existence of any formal agreement.¹⁰ However, the Prime Minister does seem to have put great store by his relationship with Johnson, noting on a number of occasions that a personal approach to the President might cut through the niceties of multilateral negotiation.¹¹ Wilson sent a number of revealing personal minutes about the British economy to Johnson, which mainly attempted to show the British situation in the best possible light.¹² This showed the Prime Minister's usual confidence in the efficacy of his own personal diplomacy and negotiating skills, for instance telling the Cabinet in December 1965 that, despite the difficulties of his visit to Washington, 'once I met the President it went like a bomb'.¹³ The President's view of Wilson, on the other hand, seems to have varied from grudging respect, even bonhomie, to angry contempt.¹⁴ By August 1965 Johnson caricatured Wilson privately as 'like a reckless boy that goes off and gets drunk and writes checks on his father, and he can honor 2 or 3 or 4 of them ... finally [you have to] call him in and just tell him, now we've got to work this out where you live off what you're making'.¹⁵

The challenge for historians is to move on from these contemporary personal judgements, and to see Wilson and Johnson's policies in their proper context. This should, for one thing, include British ministers' conviction – expressed in their secret Chequers meeting of November 1964 – that Wilson's willingness to uphold the UK's global presence had more to do with the absurdity and unlikelihood of a war in Europe than it did with helping the Americans.¹⁶ It is just possible that Wilson's commitment to this relationship, combined with Britain's relative weakness, made him yet another tool for achieving American objectives. But right from the start of his term in office the actual archival records of the Prime Minister's dealings with the Americans show him resisting, as well as agreeing with, many of their aims. The two men's first face-to-face meeting as national leaders saw Wilson counter – albeit in a measured and quiet manner – American demands that Britain enter the Vietnam War, cut social spending at home

and cut off trade with Cuba.¹⁷ There was, in place of any 'deal', a vague sense of the two countries' intertwined economic and military challenges, which constantly jostled with Wilson's astute use of his own domestic difficulties and his need to head off any UK involvement in Vietnam.¹⁸

The weakest partner in any system can acquire a great deal of power if its collaborators are unwilling to let it disintegrate. So it was in the British case, for the collapse of the Americans' junior partner could also threaten her own economic and diplomatic interests. This was summed up in June 1965 when Johnson admitted to the British Chancellor, James Callaghan, that 'when you have headaches, we have headaches too'.¹⁹ The British knew that the US authorities regarded sterling as a 'first line of defence' against speculation, and looked to the USA for financial backing given 'the close association between sterling and the dollar'.²⁰ As the Chairman of the Federal Reserve, William McChesney Martin, told Wilson on the latter's first visit to Washington as Prime Minister, 'from some points of view the dollar was almost as delicately placed as sterling'. The two countries 'must therefore co-operate in securing the maximum possible understanding of the policies which they were trying to promote'.²¹ There was and is a logical flaw in any 'deal' swapping support for sterling for British strategic help 'East of Suez': the Americans might have to part with many more dollars than they would by bringing in other allies, or going it alone. As Secretary Fowler put it when just such a deal was discussed in Washington during 1966: if too much pressure was used, 'we would have [an] open-ended commitment for financial support'.²²

From crisis to devaluation, October 1964–November 1967

Anglo-American financial diplomacy at this time was driven by the pound's continued weakness. There were four major currency emergencies running up to the Wilson government's traumatic decision to abandon the existing dollar peg, beginning with the sterling crisis of November 1964, taking in two more sterling crises in July–September 1965 and July 1966, and then the devaluation of November 1967. These continuing crises were mainly caused by Britain's persistent balance of payments deficit, a particularly heavy inheritance for the new government, as when Labour came to power it stood at nearly £800m for the calendar year 1964. Measures taken by the new government to tackle this problem, for instance a 15 per cent import surcharge, in the medium term proved ineffective in boosting Britain's balance of payments position to the extent government spending abroad required.²³

These incidents show just how much leverage the British retained over the Americans, for the senior power struggled to impose its influence and its solutions throughout the course of each. For instance, the late 1964 run on sterling, sparked off first by Labour's election and then by investors' panicky reactions to the Labour government's first Budget in November, was ridden

out with a multilateral \$3bn loan which the USA helped to raise.²⁴ The Americans had been resisting British interest rate rises for months, in much the same way as Kennedy had sought to restrain Macmillan and Maudling.²⁵ It was only late in November that they were forced to acquiesce in a 2 per cent increase in the London Bank Rate.²⁶ This despite the fact that they were highly dubious about the import surcharge and short-term funding arrangements the British had already announced, for both threatened the free trade and multilateral convertibility for which London and Washington had worked for so many years. The State Department told Embassies that they should 'indicate some reservation and caution as to acceptability', though they should say that they were 'somewhat optimistic since we are faced with *fait accompli*'. It was hardly a ringing endorsement.²⁷ Otto Eckstein, a member of the President's Council of Economic Advisers, came to a similar conclusion. His visit to London in the wake of Labour's first sterling crisis ended with the following judgement: 'they [ministers and officials] are very shaken by recent events and are trying to pick up the pieces. The experts say it's got to be Deflation or Devaluation, but the political situation may dictate a long-shot gamble of Muddling Through.'²⁸ Ambassador Bruce later referred derisively to the fact that 'there was really no full recognition of the need for drastic action until successive British delegations had been cooked to a turn ... at meetings in Paris, Geneva, etc., and successively pushed and wedged by central bankers everywhere'.²⁹

The sterling crisis of summer 1965 quite clearly showed the limits of US influence.³⁰ By this stage, it was obvious that Britain would not be in balance of payments surplus or equilibrium even by the end of 1966 – the date which had convinced the IMF to extend their loans in the spring. The April 1965 summit between Johnson and Wilson had seen the President urge 'a tight' Budget on the Prime Minister, so as 'to achieve confidence in your currency'.³¹ The US outlook became more and more pessimistic, particularly given the Wilson government's weak position politically. Fowler's opinion on the eve of Callaghan's June 1965 visit made the point even more forcefully than had the President:

With a country virtually evenly divided politically, no government has been strong enough to carry out the economic policies required to eliminate [its] ... basic weakness. The British public remains, even today, apparently unconcerned at the bleak outlook. Wilson and his colleagues have taken one measure after another since coming into office ... A listing of these actions sounds imposing, but the measures have been taken in bits and pieces as forced on them by the continuing deterioration of the payments situation, and each has been cut short of the degree of severity which the international financial community thought necessary ... The outlook is not very promising in the absence of more decisive British measures to correct its position.³²

Gardner Ackley and Heller visited London early in July, and found that despite the 'official line' being that 'their long-term measures' would work, 'it [was] ... obvious that almost everyone is clearly worried that it isn't so'. Ackley found Brown particularly 'violent' and unconvincing.³³

There seemed little the British could do on their own. The UK government's own economic advisers – including both Balogh and Nicholas Kaldor, Special Adviser to the Chancellor – counselled that no more debt could be incurred at this point, coming on top of the November agreements.³⁴ Consequently, harsh economic measures now appeared unavoidable if the pound's value was to be maintained. The British proposed deferring some public expenditure on capital account and enforcing harsher hire purchase deposit terms to lessen the pressure of home demand. The first set of 'July measures' carried these proposals into effect, with some public expenditure postponed for six months and local authority borrowing restricted. This was expected to save £200m in a full year.³⁵

Many American officials, especially in the Treasury, were now determined to secure a more draconian package, including a full 'wage price freeze' and much stronger hire purchase measures than the British were proposing.³⁶ But one member of the National Security Council staff summed up US difficulties had they chosen to force the issue: 'the British do not have many places to go. But they have a capacity for mischief-making, and I would not under-estimate the possibilities for joint mischief-making with Paris, if the British put their minds to it.'³⁷ It was no wonder that other members of the Johnson team, in particular Ball and the President's National Security Adviser Francis Bator, would have preferred to offer a generous 'package deal' – a world role, in return for a huge loan. '[British Labour ministers] cannot', he argued, 'be expected indefinitely to follow Tory economic policies at home ... and maintain British presence East of Suez and on the Rhine ... unless we give him [Wilson] a sense that we are engaged on his economic problem and that there is some prospect for a deal which will keep the speculators at bay'.³⁸

The Americans' reaction would indeed become central to the effectiveness of these measures: fearing how US opinion might develop, Wilson decided to send his trusted Cabinet Secretary, Burke Trend, to Washington to explain government policy.³⁹ He seems to have come back to London with the message that 'devaluation was out', as the USA would take 'retaliatory action' against Britain to protect its own balance of payments which might be damaged by a downwards adjustment of sterling-area parities.⁴⁰ Waiting to see how the July package would affect the markets, Wilson and Callaghan passed an anxious August holiday season, the former in the Scillies and the latter on the Isle of Wight, communicating with each other and the Americans – mainly in the person of Henry Fowler, the US Treasury Secretary – by telephone.⁴¹ In the meantime, Martin from the Federal Reserve and Lord Cromer, Governor of the Bank of England, had worked

out their own rescue scheme.⁴² In line with American demands, this would be an international loan from members of the G10, in return for a statutory wage-price policy with public targets, Central Bank rather than governmental co-ordination, and a guarantee that the British would not convert any dollars they acquired under this plan into gold.⁴³ This then became the basis of the American negotiating position, in contradistinction to the more dovish views of many in the White House and the State Department.⁴⁴

British ministers had been considering a tougher incomes policy since the spring, and had decided to consult industry and trade unions about a new policy before the new sterling crisis broke.⁴⁵ However, the Prime Minister was clear from the start of this new crisis – contrary to the views of Cromer, as well as the Americans – that there was simply no political possibility of going beyond a voluntary policy. The Labour Party, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the employers simply would not agree, especially after the July measures. As Callaghan told Fowler on the telephone, such measures were ‘politically and industrially impossible’.⁴⁶ In meetings with Frederick Deming, the Under-Secretary to the US Treasury who had been sent to London to negotiate, the British insisted that the voluntary measures would soon take hold, perhaps in the autumn, and that sterling would be defended (in the Treasury civil servant William Armstrong’s words) ‘to the last gasp’.⁴⁷

The counter-proposal from the British was that the Prime Minister would make a public appeal for wage and price restraint, and during the late summer and early autumn consult industry on a more extensive voluntary programme. A statutory National Board for Prices and Incomes would also be created to consider wage and price rises, with powers to enforce a 90-day moratorium or ‘standstill’ on settlements while they did so.⁴⁸ Key officials – such as Merlyn Trued, Assistant Secretary for International Affairs at the US Treasury – remained deeply sceptical throughout, and recommended holding to the original Martin-Cromer package.⁴⁹ However, the Deputy Under-Secretary at the Department of Economic Affairs (DEA), Douglas Allen, was sent to Washington to follow up the Trend mission and explain the British position once again. He apparently made some progress, for he seems to have convinced most concerned that an overall wage-price freeze was ‘impossible’.⁵⁰

The US position at this point was therefore weakening since, in Wilson’s words, they had been ‘pushed off their more dramatic demands’. They were willing to accept the British plans for a National Board with delaying powers and an early warning system, without the early appeal for a wage and price ‘freeze’ they had wanted. Wilson was prepared to consider a voluntary appeal for a freeze, but Brown, in charge of prices and incomes policy at the DEA, was not, and Callaghan made clear once more to Fowler that it would be ‘the better for all concerned’ if the idea was dropped for it was ‘not a phrase to find favour here’. Brown told McGeorge Bundy, the President’s Special Assistant on National Security, in a highly emotional telephone call

that he was sending his Permanent Under-Secretary, Eric Roll, to Washington to explain the British position once more.⁵¹ Subject to seeing Wilson's final statement before it was made, the Americans at this point conceded that their more radical demands were unrealistic.⁵²

At least as far as prices and incomes policy was concerned, the British got their way. Fowler came to Europe and organised a multilateral loan from Central Banks, 'warm in his praise' for the Labour government's eventual prices and incomes measures.⁵³ European bankers were very lukewarm – as was Cromer, extremely doubtful that Labour could deliver on its pledges. A G10 meeting of central bankers in Basle on 5 September went very badly, with the French withdrawing. It took all the Americans' pressure, and prolonged British persuasion, to secure the Group's acquiescence.⁵⁴ The USA contributed \$400m to a wider credit package; existing 'swap' arrangements were extended yet again, to \$1.35bn.⁵⁵

Throughout the crisis, there had been threats the Americans could not afford to ignore. The first was that Wilson himself might force a meeting in Washington and 'dump the problem' in Johnson's lap; the second was that the British might devalue, perhaps calling a General Election on a 'bankers versus people' basis.⁵⁶ One third and even more terrifying threat was to float the pound and let it find its own value. William Armstrong told Deming at this point that he was convinced Wilson would defend sterling 'to the last gasp – all reserves would be thrown into the fight – and anything else the Prime Minister could lay his hands on'. This would mean that, were he 'forced' to devalue, 'sterling would obviously have to float rather than ... get a definite devaluation, because there would be no reserves'.⁵⁷ Devaluation to another fixed point was a third possibility – though hardly a more alluring one. As Fowler made clear to Johnson, a large devaluation of 20–30 per cent would 'cost far too much for us and for the world' to be tolerable. US losses of gold and dollars in the ensuing chaos would be very large. Though the shock of a smaller devaluation of 10–15 per cent might be absorbed by multilateral action, there was no guarantee of this.⁵⁸

The third sterling crisis of this period, partly by virtue of the recurring nature of these incidents, saw the British in a weaker negotiating position. The new policies announced in July and September 1965 had clearly not secured sterling's position, and Fowler for one called for 'much stronger stabilisation measures', both in bilateral talks with Callaghan and in his advice to the President. The Americans now became more insistent on 'compression of demand and a prompt inauguration of an effective incomes policy'. The Secretary of the Treasury was now even more strident with the British, arguing that 'United Kingdom performance since ... the support operation ... has been disappointing, both to us and the market. It shows no signs of the major improvement that is needed for confidence in sterling ... and the avoidance of dissipation of reserves that have been accumulated as a result of aid by others'.⁵⁹ Callaghan concurred, given that as he put it 'devaluation

is out', though he was initially unspecific with Fowler as to what exactly was being planned in London.⁶⁰

There was now not as much time for delay as there had been a year earlier, nor the excuse that the government's measures had not had time to work. Wilson therefore announced on 20 July 1966 a range of economic measures on the fiscal side that effectively brought the first, expansionary, phase of the Labour governments to an end. The package also finally contained the wage, salary and dividend 'freeze' that the Americans had called for in 1965, and of longer duration than had been mooted a year before. This 'standstill' was to last for six months.⁶¹ However, the British still had some cards to play. When Wilson visited the American capital at the end of July, he issued the veiled threat that Britain might cash in its US securities portfolio, further increasing strain on the US balance of payments. Thus he ambiguously assured Johnson that he did not 'want a siege economy but ... [he had] to put [the] UK first'.⁶²

The final crisis began in late September 1967, when the EEC Commission published its 'Appraisal' of the second British application to join the Community. It was highly critical of sterling's residual role as a world reserve currency, and called into question Britain's ability to hold the pound's exchange rate at its present level. Coming on top of the disruption to trade of the Arab-Israeli War of June, and a series of dock strikes, the effect on market sentiment was predictable.⁶³ A new wave of speculation about sterling's future critically weakened the currency in the markets. Devaluation now looked more likely than ever, given the Europeans' concerns, though it would be against the explicit wish of the Americans. US officials desperately attempted to raise enough international support to once more lend Britain enough to tide her over her immediate difficulties. Fowler, Deming and Walt Rostow all advised yet another support package.⁶⁴

This new challenge seemed of even greater proportions than the previous ones, and obviously required a fresh policy response.⁶⁵ The first US move was to expand their financial support in late October, adding another \$100m to the \$400m already available to Britain direct from the USA.⁶⁶ However, this time American offers of help did not have the effect of eliciting concessions from across the Atlantic. For one thing, European ministers and central bankers seemed unimpressed, and were withholding their co-operation from the massive \$3bn loan proposed by the Americans. Wilson was also clear that he could not accept another major deflationary package if it was only to allow his government to stumble through to yet another balance of payments crisis.⁶⁷ The British had gone as far in this direction as they could, despite last-minute American attempts to raise a multilateral loan under new conditions. By 13 November, some American officials, especially within the US Treasury, were inclined to accept that the divisions among the Europeans made devaluation inevitable, and wanted to turn their energies to affecting the timing of the change, and the new rate. However, the President himself was still adamant that devaluation could not be accepted.⁶⁸

Johnson once again found the possible consequences of a sterling devaluation for the dollar too grave to contemplate, and the USA let British decision-makers know this was their view in no uncertain terms.⁶⁹ The President's hard line was boosted by reports from Deming, in Paris attempting to organise another support operation: the Germans and Italians were beginning to respond to US pressure, and were indicating some willingness to help. However, given their earlier opposition to a multilateral rescue package and the widespread doubts about sterling's future, it would take more than a few days of emergency bargaining to bring the Europeans round to this position. By the end of the week, Deming could report only that the German and Italian G10 Deputies were 'optimistic' that their governments could help. However, all that was actually *settled* at this point was that the British could set up another standby with the IMF – a deal that might take weeks to secure.⁷⁰

This last-minute manoeuvring was in vain, since the British had decided earlier in the week to devalue. Given the fact that no package deal was being offered at the end of the week beginning Monday 13 November, the decision to peg sterling at a new parity of \$2.40 – a devaluation of 14 per cent – was announced on Saturday 18 November.⁷¹ International negotiations had not at that point run their course. Sir Denis Rickett, for one, later thought that a loan could and would have emerged from central bankers' talks in Paris. The Americans were willing to organise another multilateral rescue operation.⁷² But although Wilson publicly referred to rejecting unspecified conditions, it had actually been the perceived *threat* of such conditions that had prompted the final decision to devalue. They might have involved even more draconian conditions, over which he might have no domestic political control. In the event the British were able to avoid explicit IMF targets being attached to their eventual Letter of Intent.⁷³

But the IMF certainly pressed for new terms; and defending the old parity may have strengthened the Fund's hand. By now the short-term liabilities the British had built up in their defence of the pound would necessitate going back for loans yet again the following year if they continued the fight. This is the point that seems to have convinced Callaghan, and which he emphasised to Fowler.⁷⁴ As Wilson told his new Chancellor, Roy Jenkins, any new help 'could only have been on a three-month basis or three-months renewable, with an absolute maximum of a year'. 'Totally unacceptable conditions' could have been imposed on Britain, and even then 'we should almost certainly have been in the same difficulty next summer or autumn'.⁷⁵ Even so, Wilson's ill-advised reference to 'the pound in your pocket' having *not* been devalued, after so many years of defending a fixed parity under governments of both parties, was seen as a fundamental breach of faith by an electorate that had been told for so long that they had to work longer and be paid less to defend sterling.⁷⁶ If there was a single moment that encapsulated the caesura between Parliament and people, and

encapsulates the unintended consequences of declared policy objectives, then this was surely it.

The road from devaluation: the fraying of Bretton Woods and the gold crisis, 1967–68

All the Americans' attempts to protect the dollar through the defence of sterling had therefore failed. Washington knew that it was by no means assured that the British would hold on without floating the pound, even if they wanted to defend their new rate.⁷⁷ The Bank of England was also far from convinced that it could hold the line.⁷⁸ And it took only four months, until the general gold crisis of March 1968, for the wider effects of devaluation, so feared in Washington for so long, to become apparent. By that point, confidence in the dollar was so low as to make upward pressure on the gold price intolerable. Balance of payments and inflation news was unremittingly grim ahead of the relative improvements Johnson's measures managed to secure during 1968 itself.⁷⁹ The Americans alone lost \$1bn during the November 1967 sterling crisis.⁸⁰ Between November and December, they spent a further \$1.6bn trying to defend the parity of the dollar itself.⁸¹

By now the gold pool too was heavily in deficit, having been reactivated in January 1965, and was indeed paying out very large sums to hold the price down.⁸² It sold \$270m in 1966, and \$300m in the 11 months running up to sterling's devaluation in 1967. During that crisis another \$641m drained away.⁸³ But the uncertainty unleashed by sterling's devaluation set off a wave of speculation that overwhelmed the hasty improvisations that Roosa had constructed in 1962–63. US officials did have an emergency answer to this problem, which had been worked out by Deming since the early autumn of 1967. This involved separating the market price of gold, which would be allowed to float upwards, from the rate at which Central Banks were to trade it between themselves, which would remain fixed at one ounce of gold to \$35.⁸⁴

This was very much a crisis measure, since the Federal Reserve and Treasury would have preferred to take longer and then issue 'gold certificates' based on nations' holdings in the gold pool. This, they hoped, would still the speculation without the technical and complex operation of declaring two 'prices' for gold. But the two-tier solution seemed a useful temporary fix for the moment. Arthur Okun, Johnson's new chair of the Council of Economic Advisers, called it 'a temporary expedient' designed to give the USA 'breathing space'. The need was by now desperate: the British and the gold pool lost \$351m in a single day on 8 March as speculation mounted.⁸⁵ By Thursday 14 March, gold buying reached such proportions that the outflow of US dollars was unsustainable without some immediate action. The Americans asked the British to close the London gold pool (necessitating a Bank Holiday) to allow them to advance their

two-tier solution at an emergency meeting of Finance ministers over the weekend.⁸⁶

The British did not think that a dual-price system would hold for any length of time.⁸⁷ The Economic Advisers argued that ways would be found of 'circumventing' and undermining the dual-price system; they also argued that its survival would depend on the European Central Banks' willingness to hold dollars for gold, the lack of which was one of the main problems with the existing system.⁸⁸ However, having received assurances from Martin to the Bank of England that if the London markets were still closed the following week, the USA would support sterling against the inevitable loss of confidence in American markets, the British acceded to this request in the early hours of Friday morning.⁸⁹ The decision was confirmed the next morning when the full Cabinet assembled.⁹⁰ However, Wilson did lose George Brown, his Foreign Secretary, furious at not having been 'consulted', in the process: Wilson argued that he simply could not find Brown in time for the decision to be made.⁹¹

Furthermore, given American pressure the British were forced to accept that the two-tier US proposal would be the main idea considered at the emergency weekend meeting. They also had to agree to two further days' Bank Holiday the following week, linked to an extension of Britain's multi-lateral line of credit from \$2.8bn to \$4bn.⁹² Should the banks be open, the pressure on sterling, with or without further help, would be intolerable and would probably have forced the government into floating sterling.⁹³ Given the new measures, the extended help for the pound, and Jenkins' extremely stringent Budget introduced on Tuesday 19 March, sterling managed to survive at its new rate, and even rose a little.⁹⁴

During 1967 and 1968, a radical alternative had been prepared in London, in case just such attempts to reinforce the existing system ultimately broke down. In its final form, this option was known as 'operation Brutus'.⁹⁵ This would involve floating the pound and 'blocking' the sterling balances, in order to prevent the pound falling too far: UK authorities came very close to implementing this scheme in the crisis of March 1968.⁹⁶ Many government advisers had been convinced of the 'absurdity of fixed rates' for some years, as Samuel Brittan's diary of his time in the DEA between 1964 and 1966 reveals; Kaldor was an early convert, though ministers demurred.⁹⁷ Even the Bank of England was by this stage not unsympathetic to the idea of a 'float', albeit temporarily and under the extreme duress of the gold crisis.⁹⁸ The Americans were fully aware of these plans, and following the November 1967 devaluation were by no means confident that they could rely on the British not to put them into effect.⁹⁹ The threat to the dollar was now not only of a sterling collapse, but also a deliberate float, clearly demonstrating increasing British independence from the Americans, and the growing inability of Washington to impose its economic will. The danger had been averted, but would return if the British balance of payments came once more under sustained pressure.

International monetary reform: the road to Special Drawing Rights

Through all these crises, there were abiding themes that prevented the USA from pushing home its negotiating advantage with the British. The first was the deteriorating state of the US economy. The 1960s US balance of payments deficit up to 1968 may have been relatively small by later standards, but by the mid-1960s it seemed to have become persistent, especially on capital account given American companies' large investments abroad, and the huge expenditure in South-East Asia associated with the Vietnam War.¹⁰⁰ Only the imposition of mandatory foreign investment limits in January 1968 and the tax rises that Lyndon Johnson finally rammed through Congress during his last year in office reversed a deteriorating balance of payments position in terms of private trade and payments. The private sector US balance of payments was in the black during 1968 and 1969.¹⁰¹ The respite would prove only temporary, as Figure 4.1 reveals: the situation would deteriorate again during 1970 and 1971, testament to the underlying erosion of the USA's competitive strength.

The French, and especially de Gaulle, were furthermore still keen to contest the United States' political, military and economic domination of the Western alliance. Their proposed Collective Reserve Unit (CRU), linked to countries' existing gold reserves and only available as extra credit within the IMF system once strict balance of payments targets had been met, became an increasingly dangerous political rival to the dollar.¹⁰² In February 1965 de Gaulle went further and announced his personal desire to replace the dollar as the world's main reserve currency through a return to the gold standard.¹⁰³ De Gaulle continued to argue that the Anglo-Saxon countries were living beyond their means, a situation that was bound to end in world recession when they finally retrenched. The French thus began to buy gold, to drive up its price against the dollar and force the adoption of their programme.¹⁰⁴ Failing this, they persuaded some of the other EEC countries, especially the Benelux nations, to propose only the creation of new drawing rights within the IMF that would be very tightly policed by the international community – in short, by the EEC. Coupled with France's *détente* with the Soviet Union, and the February 1966 ultimatum to NATO forces that they should leave France, there could have been no clearer challenge to US hegemony.¹⁰⁵ The incipient challenge of 1961–63 had become manifest.¹⁰⁶

Either the French or the wider European proposals would rob the Americans of the freedom of manoeuvre granted them by being able to simply print more of the world's main reserve asset.¹⁰⁷ US policy was therefore aimed at avoiding this outcome, which helps to explain the Americans' renewed interest in the subject of new reserves during 1965.¹⁰⁸ The British, meanwhile, cast themselves as mediators, seeking ways to de-link the proposed French CRU from gold.¹⁰⁹ Their representatives, including Rickett as

a constant presence in G10 negotiations, continually pressed ‘for deliberate reserve creation [that] could be vested partly in IMF and partly in a limited group [of countries]’.¹¹⁰ The British had high hopes that Prime Minister Georges Pompidou and Finance Minister Valéry Giscard d’Estaing would rein in Rueff and de Gaulle’s worst instincts.¹¹¹ Their compromise proposal envisaged the creation of a new reserve unit, but one which would be held in tandem with sterling and dollars. This unit would have ‘an association’ with gold, but would not be redeemable for gold if a member left the reserve scheme.¹¹²

There was extensive overlap between British ideas and interests and the eventual US proposals for a ‘dual approach’, since the Americans envisaged a reserve unit linked to the currencies of a pool of member currencies, not to gold – ‘in effect, Money’.¹¹³ These new assets eventually came to be termed Special Drawing Rights (SDRs).¹¹⁴ This was a continuation of the expansionist moves made since 1961, creating ‘new money’ rather than the additional credit of French proposals. But it would also allow multilateral monitoring of the drawings that would not purely be based on the existing reserve currencies – the dollar and the pound. The idea therefore represented a compromise between European and ‘Anglo-Saxon’ views.¹¹⁵ Washington and London were still essentially allies in their quest for anything that could help finance their external deficits, and were prepared to dilute almost any of their plans to meet that objective: another reason for Washington to concert its general efforts with London.¹¹⁶

It was not only the British, but also the EEC Five excluding France, who eventually sought a compromise – though on their terms. Although Italy, Germany and the Benelux countries had no desire to alienate Paris, they made clear during 1966 that no other ‘new’ currency, or even gold, could alone bear the strain of serving as the world’s main reserve currency for very long. Their ideas were embodied in the proposals of the German Chairman of G10 Deputies, Otmar Emminger, first circulated in draft during January 1966.¹¹⁷ The plan did not rule out the idea of new drawing rights based in the IMF, which required a unanimous G10 vote before they came into effect – the ideal for many EEC countries. The report also left open the possibility of multilateral supervision of the US balance of payments. These proposals would also have established a fixed link between any new reserve unit and gold once the new reserve units were created. All of this was still deeply unwelcome in Washington.¹¹⁸ What the Council of Economic Advisers termed ‘the strong Continental European prejudice against the Fund and the European desire to lodge the power to make decisions ... within the Group of Ten’ was unacceptable because those same Continentals possessed an even stronger negotiating position within the G10 than they did in the counsels of the Fund.¹¹⁹ The Johnson administration constantly pressed to take the discussion out of the G10 and into wider international arenas such as the IMF, where support from American allies and less developed countries

might prove fruitful.¹²⁰ Wilson, too, grew increasingly irate about 'the outright obstruction of France'.¹²¹

The British, desperate for any scheme of reserve creation to succeed and help shelter sterling, continued to table compromise proposals, for instance at the G10 meeting in Rome in May 1966, attempting to build bridges between the USA and an EEC of which they were once more beginning to consider membership. However, Franco-American divisions once more forestalled agreement at the G10 meeting at The Hague that considered the Emminger report.¹²² Following this failure, Anglo-American co-operation in these negotiations appears to have been raised to even higher levels.¹²³ But what Callaghan and Fowler called 'the yeoman work' of the details took many months of thorough bargaining; one major G10 conference in London broke down in the summer of 1967 without agreement.¹²⁴ Callaghan, in the chair for most of the G10's formal meetings, was only just able to keep the proposal afloat among that group's Deputies – a fact which temporarily boosted sterling on the exchanges through the summer of 1967.¹²⁵

In truth, world opinion on this issue moved in the Americans' direction throughout the late 1960s, partly because the French had isolated themselves through their extreme obstructionism.¹²⁶ The Germans, in particular, had by late 1967 grown impatient with the failure to create new currency resources of *any* type, since this would eventually put pressure on them to inflate their economy and 'put right' their balance of payments surplus.¹²⁷ By the time of the Rio IMF summit in October 1967, a scheme for Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) much more like the American vision than the French – linked to existing currencies, rather than gold – was ready.¹²⁸ SDRs also broke the link between new currency creation and the views of the G10.¹²⁹ Although the Americans had been obliged to concede that these plans would only be readied on a 'contingency' basis, with the EEC Six possessing a veto before they were issued, the French still abstained from the final SDR settlement at the Stockholm G10 summit in March 1968. They would eventually accede to SDRs, but only once de Gaulle was no longer President.¹³⁰ The link between sterling and the dollar created by the struggle to reform the international financial system had been at the heart of the American ability to manage the world economy: all allies were invaluable in the struggle against the French, especially as the dollar weakened.

The multilateral loan concept and the German offset negotiations

Between crises, the Johnson administration – and especially the Treasury – occasionally suggested concerting a massive and long-term settlement that would guarantee sterling's value.¹³¹ Fowler proposed a three-year loan from both the USA and the Europeans to Callaghan in June 1965.¹³² The Chancellor was unenthusiastic, pointing out just how indebted Britain had become, the

lack of support such an initiative could be expected to attract in Europe, and the danger of an immediate and irresistible attack on sterling should word of such an offer leak out.¹³³ The British preferred to wait for their periodic crises to arrange large loans, for instance the \$2.7bn they were able to raise in the weeks following devaluation.¹³⁴ Ministers hoped that their domestic economic reforms would save them from having to commit themselves to the inevitable conditions of such a loan. Leslie O'Brien, by now Governor of the Bank of England, rebuffed another 'long-term' offer in November 1966.¹³⁵

American offers made in early 1967 related specifically to the defence of West Germany, and granted even greater American help than had hitherto been forthcoming, on condition that the British kept their troops on the European mainland. The British had been seeking savings in this theatre since spring and summer 1965, when they rolled over their own 1964 offset agreements for a further year, but had been forced into accepting a rather less generous package than previously.¹³⁶ In May 1965 Wilson told Secretary of State Rusk that 'the Germans had behaved badly and there was pressure in the UK to pull out entirely'; early in 1966 the British went public on the matter; and in July of that year the threat to dissolve their conventional forces in Germany was renewed.¹³⁷ As Callaghan told Fowler, 'I find it quite intolerable that the German bankers should take up a holier than thou attitude about our balance of payments deficit ... If only I could persuade the Cabinet to start withdrawing a platoon a week I think we would get a settlement pretty quickly!'¹³⁸ The British called repeatedly for a full offset for their own costs – more, of course, than the Americans had been able to negotiate since 1960. This would have amounted to an increase in German payments and purchases to between £50m and £90m per annum, though the Americans understood that the UK would be 'prepared to accept' a rather lower figure.¹³⁹ In September 1966 the British forced the Americans to make £20m of emergency military purchases in the UK to head off the threat of an immediate pull-out from West Germany.¹⁴⁰

Johnson's summit meeting with Chancellor Erhard that month, during which the President pressed again and again for a greater German financial contribution to American costs, also went very badly. Erhard required a large cut in German contributions to US troop costs for domestic reasons, as the German economy had temporarily slipped into recession; his pleas were rebuffed.¹⁴¹ The German delegation was left upset and angry, to say the least, and Erhard's Conservative–Liberal administration lasted only until December, being replaced by a grand coalition under Kurt Kiesinger.¹⁴² McNamara had for years argued that the Federal Republic should adhere to American strategic ideas, stressing 'flexible response' and a conventional tripwire in central Europe. Now the Americans were threatening Bonn with massive troop withdrawals. Washington's need for more money (and Congressional pressure) seemed to necessitate such an approach: but the diplomatic damage was enormous.¹⁴³

Some other way clearly had to be found to manage this knot of financial and military issues, so in late 1966 the White House successfully placed discreet and successful pressure on the British to desist from immediate threats.¹⁴⁴ Anglo-American–German trilateral talks, themselves originating in the need to draw West Germany into nuclear decision-making and to deliberate on the next moves after the French exit from NATO's military command, would now run their course. The offset issue would be 'multilateralised'.¹⁴⁵ Three developments recommended caution and conciliation to the British Prime Minister. He was about to announce Britain's second attempt to join the EEC, a bid in which he would need the Germans' help.¹⁴⁶ Second, the new grand coalition in Bonn was proving friendlier to France than had the more conservative and more decisive Erhard.¹⁴⁷ Third and last, the Soviet leadership was also making it clear that they had no interest in mutual troop reductions in central Europe. This rather dashed Wilson's hopes of reaping the economic benefits of a more general disengagement.¹⁴⁸

Long and fraught negotiations followed, with the British gradually bringing their bid down to £41–45m by the spring of 1967 but continuing to cajole and plead on the basis that – economically and politically – they could not deflate much more. They thought they had secured at least a 30 per cent offset agreement at the end of 1966, but Erhard's fall from power threw those calculations into doubt. West Germany's new grand coalition signalled that the economic situation was not 'so gloomy' that they would have to reconsider even this offer.¹⁴⁹ The issue became entangled with the Americans' wish to include West Germany in some way in NATO's nuclear deterrent – in Rostow's words, to 'give Germany enough, perhaps via the nuclear issue, so that Bonn is willing to offset BAOR foreign exchange costs'.¹⁵⁰ Tripartite talks also became bogged down in the issue of how much the Germans should pay for defence procurement in the UK.¹⁵¹ In the end the British were allowed to withdraw one brigade and two RAF squadrons from West Germany, while the Germans' military and civil purchases in the UK – at \$112m – were broadly in line with Wilson and Callaghan's final offer in the talks.¹⁵²

Still, the issue was not finally settled on any firm basis. British civil servants, such as Trend, became more and more unhappy during 1968 and 1969, since many of these German purchases would have happened anyway.¹⁵³ Whitehall and Westminster still needed more if they were to hold sterling's parity. US officials had already informally approached Britain with another 'monetary' deal in early 1967, in which 'defence and world liquidity [would] be lumped together'.¹⁵⁴ A 'global solution' would be sought in which US and UK troops in Germany would be paid for partly by a German agreement to hold dollars and dollar bonds, as well as participating in a huge UK loan of \$4bn, to be repaid over a long period – up to 30 years.¹⁵⁵ The British rejected this suggestion, arguing that it would not provide them with immediate help and would involve incurring even more debt.¹⁵⁶ Even Balogh and Trend found themselves in rare agreement over the fact that

the loan proposal was too 'amorphous', 'obscure' and impractical, relying on European help that might not be forthcoming.¹⁵⁷ Tripartite talks would eventually settle the issue of West German defence through an extension of existing 'offset' agreements, under which the Germans agreed to buy dollar items, and subsidise the defence spending of both Britain and the USA.¹⁵⁸ In the meantime, proposals for a long-term loan had been shown to be impracticable, while the entangling of the offer with NATO's internal divisions had wasted valuable time.

Conclusions: the strengths of weakness

In June 1965, Johnson's economic advisers submitted a memorandum to the President which succinctly summarised Britain's main dilemmas. In it they wrote:

The basis of the trouble ... [is] economic. Pressure on the pound will head the list. Balance of payments deficits persist ... Meanwhile, the strain of coping day by day compounds the trouble. Ministers ... have lost a lot of steam. So have the senior civil servants on whom any British government depends. Walking their economic tightrope soaks up energy, saps initiative, and colors their approach to every policy, emphatically including their political commitments overseas ... They hurt so badly that they will have to step off soon, unless we take the lead ... The less they can be sure that together we can bring off monetary changes internationally, the more they must consider retrenchment abroad and devaluation or exchange controls at home. Both would hurt us. Retrenchment would increase pressure on us to fill power vacuums. Devaluation or controls would increase pressure on the dollar.¹⁵⁹

This assessment captured the strange mix of British intellectual exhaustion and negotiating strength in an ever more complex world. British ministers clearly were pouring out both political and physical capital in an ever more complex intellectual environment, and with an increasingly sceptical electorate. Devaluation might shatter both – as indeed seemed to be the case by the winter of 1967–68. But the Johnson administration had to agree with Britain's final negotiating positions – over the international liquidity compromise, German offsets and even 'East of Suez' – because their ally was too fragile to be pushed around. The Americans did put a great deal of pressure on the British to maintain their world defence role. Ball and Bruce pressed Wilson on this point immediately following the July crisis of 1965, though they received only the extremely vague pledge that 'Her Majesty's Government were quite clear that finance, foreign policy and defence must hang together, particularly East of Suez'.¹⁶⁰ In April 1967 Johnson asked Wilson whether he was 'going crazy' in seeking to withdraw from South-East Asia while the Americans

were still fighting in Vietnam.¹⁶¹ The two men's June 1967 summit saw the President, in Bator's words, 'hit Wilson hard'.¹⁶² Rusk was eventually reduced to urging Brown to 'be British': 'For God's sake, act like Britain!'¹⁶³ But the final sterling crises of late 1967 and early 1968 finally forced the Cabinet to admit that they could no longer pay for a military role in Asia, with all the foreign exchange burdens that entailed.¹⁶⁴ In January 1968 the UK proceeded to announce a formal date for their departure from Singapore.¹⁶⁵ It was a defining decision, reached overwhelmingly to avoid binding economic and spending constraints imposed by the Americans and the Europeans. It was as much a signal of continuing freedom as an admission of failure – a retreat which signalled an assertion of independence.

The fragile calm that followed the creation of a two-tier gold price and the SDR agreement could not last. SDRs were an imperfect and deeply flawed political compromise, and as such they could not meet most of the world economy's new demands. As Catherine Schenk has put it, they 'did not replace the use of national currencies as reserve assets ... [nor] resolve the fundamental problem of the expansion of global dollar reserves backed by a shrinking ratio of gold'.¹⁶⁶ Sterling continued to need IMF standbys to fight off the danger of speculation, despite the relative tranquillity that descended as her balance of payments improved. Within three years wave after wave of speculative attack on the dollar, occasioned by the continued war in Vietnam and the Nixon administration's expansionist measures, caused President Nixon to 'close the gold window': to announce the final suspension of the dollar's convertibility into gold. The age of fixed exchange rates was over. The British, poignantly, had not been consulted, though they decided to float themselves shortly thereafter.¹⁶⁷ It was a testament to the centripetal forces that Wilson and Johnson had for so long struggled to defy.

Emphasising the 'external constraints' imposed on British policy-makers by the demands of other powers ignores how important domestic considerations remained, how much the British had preserved, and how far the American authorities had been forced to retreat – over loan terms, internal British economic policy and the UK's 'East of Suez' role. It also overlooks the way policy choices and preferences are actually constructed. To explain this process, historians should emphasise the problems faced by governments pursuing the domestic and international objectives inherent in the Bretton Woods currency system, the Cold War, defence co-operation in Asia and providing for economic growth at home – often incompatible financial, diplomatic, military, political aims – all at once.¹⁶⁸ Wilson and Johnson came uneasily to understand that the system which they were defending was subject to a continuing landslide, and were fighting to delay and to mitigate the consequences. This more empathetic and much more *historical* set of concepts would be a more incisive approach than focusing on private assurances that Wilson and Callaghan might or might not have given, or on what those pledges might have meant.

Part III
Governing Britain

6

The Creation and Early Work of the Parliamentary ‘Ombudsman’

Donald Johnson and the strange case of the Woodstock poisoning

In October 1950, the medical doctor and publisher Donald Johnson was committed under the Lunacy Act in the Oxfordshire town of Woodstock. Johnson vividly recalled his experience in his 1956 autobiography, *A Doctor Returns*:

‘I am doped’, I had told the doctor when he had called to see me – and indeed, he wrote it down in evidence against me. My illness had started with giddy turns and curious bouts of automatic talking when I had sat down in a chair and given forth oracular pronouncements, lasting several minutes at a time; words, for which I had been a mere passive vehicle, had formed themselves on my lips and been uttered for the benefit of anyone who happened to be there to listen to them.

Given such behaviour – though ignoring the strange coincidence that his wife, Betty, fell ill the same night – a doctor was summoned to his hotel to commit him. It took Johnson six months to secure release from the institution into which he had been placed, months during which he gradually recovered from ranting about the Duke of Edinburgh, and his wish to eat only apples. He gradually came to realise that ‘my reputation as a sane person, my reputation as a competent man of affairs’ – the most important elements for a man seeking a public career – were under threat.¹

Johnson had been a minor fixture on the British political scene for some time. Initially working as a GP, he had stood (unsuccessfully) for the Liberals in the by-election for Stanley Baldwin’s Bewdley seat once the Prime Minister was elevated to the House of Lords in 1937. He later broke with the Liberals, and joined the Tories in 1947, declaring that ‘liberal-minded people must defeat socialism’, and then fight against snobbery within the Conservative Party. Elected to the Commons for Carlisle in 1955, he

soon became the spokesman of an eccentric type of libertarian 'liberal-conservatism'.² But Johnson now also harboured an obsessive interest with the existence of a widespread conspiracy against him, though his various memoirs name only 'gangsters' who meant him 'harm' and wanted to take over the hotel he was running at the time. After consulting several medical friends, Johnson decided that he had been poisoned with marijuana. He wrote a short book on the subject in 1952, published by his own company, entitled *Indian Hemp: A Social Menace*.³

His liberalism was now transmuted into resisting a different threat: 'the encroachment of the bureaucratic official on the rights of the individual member of society both as regards his property, his freedom of action and even in some instances his personal liberty'.⁴ Johnson began a long campaign in Parliament to uncover what he saw as the unjust and arbitrary incarceration of many citizens who, like himself, had suffered from incidents defined as 'mental illness'. His first Parliamentary Question inquired how many people had been detained under the Lunacy Acts in that and the previous year. The answer, of just over 20,000 patients in both cases, amounted to 'a formidable number of people, the population of a fair size town'.⁵ He gradually gained the reputation of an eccentric maverick: the first Conservative MP publicly to call for Prime Minister Macmillan's resignation, he was forced to sit as an Independent from January 1964 before his defeat in the General Election of that year.⁶

Johnson, alerted to what he saw as widespread discontent about public administration by over 800 sympathetic letters, now began to campaign for the creation of a British 'guardian of public rights', on the lines of Scandinavian countries' Ombudsmen or grievance officers.⁷ He embarrassed Harold Macmillan by raising the matter at Prime Minister's Questions in June 1959, forcing the Prime Minister to 'study' the idea before rejecting it later in a written answer.⁸ Johnson then went on to launch an Adjournment Debate on the idea in May 1961.⁹ Here the Carlisle MP was drawing on powerful currents of Conservative and right-wing opinion more widely: more writers from this tradition shared his early enthusiasm than did left-wing polemicists. The libertarian journalist Thomas Utley published *Occasion for Ombudsman* in 1961, in which he argued that 'every Conservative candidate knows ... that hostility to the bureaucracy, or suspicion of it, is one of the most widespread sentiments of the electorate' – a realisation that was behind Conservatives' and their allies' relatively successful and popular early campaigns against further nationalisation.¹⁰

Utley believed a Parliamentary committee, rather than a single grievance officer, to be more in keeping with 'British traditions'; but his pamphlet, part-funded by the Society for Individual Freedom, showed that the idea might have an appeal far beyond Johnson's more colourful appeals.¹¹ The Society for Individual Freedom and its Secretary, Lillian Sutton, organised a series of public meetings on the 'Ombudsman' that included Johnson as

a speaker: the right-wing *Daily Sketch* praised her attack on 'the monster of state control'.¹² Local Conservative Associations also showed interest in the idea, and several wrote in its support to ministers.¹³ Their fascination with the idea was to spark far-reaching constitutional reforms, which often progressed in a manner far removed from their original advocates' intentions.

The Ombudsman in history and theory

A number of treatments of this subject are already available, all in their way excellent. Frank Stacey's 1971 book on *The British Ombudsman*, and Roy Gregory and Peter Hutchesson's, *The Parliamentary Ombudsman*, published in 1975, both provide dense and detailed narratives of the reform process.¹⁴ More recently, two semi-official accounts have filled in more of the detail, and have been able to examine some of the consequences of the creation of UK Ombudsman offices: Gregory and Philip Gidding's *The Ombudsman, the Citizen and Parliament*, and Richard Kirkham's 2007 *The Parliamentary Ombudsman: Withstanding the Test of Time*, published by the Parliamentary Commissioner to celebrate 40 years of her office.¹⁵

But the ongoing release of government records, including those of departments operating 'below' the Cabinet documents that Gregory and Giddings were able to draw on, as well as the papers of the political parties and key pressure groups, now together allow for the use of an enormous amount of new evidence that demonstrates not only the deliberations of central government, but some of the relations between the administration and the populace. The reform process shines a new light on 'consumerism'; helps us to understand 'hiving off' and the increased recourse to independent judgement in the public sector; and lays bare some of the contacts and links that formed the international policy-making community. 'Consumerisation', first and most obviously, began to extend to the public sector and all of its ragged and often unclear boundaries with the rest of society. The educational administrator Jack Springett made just this link in 1980, arguing that 'the whole national climate of opinion, from consumers' rights ... to race and sex equality, pointed to the abandonment of a benevolent administrative autocracy ... It was, I suppose, the advent of the Ombudsman which finally put an end to that management style.'¹⁶ Rudolf Klein, one of the foremost historians of the NHS, has always seen the Health Service Commissioner as one example of this new 'consumerism' in the public sector.¹⁷

The Ombudsman is, second, one more example of that idea of disinterested and 'apolitical' decision-making and scrutiny that took such a grip on public life among developed nations towards the end of the twentieth century. Pierre Rosanvallon has recently discussed this 'industry of evaluation' as one aspect of the gathering counter-democracy of the late twentieth century.¹⁸ Offices of oversight have increasingly stood in for politicians for sceptical voters who have increasingly distrusted their leaders – a process

that was well under way after the Vassal and Profumo affairs leading up to the temporary end of the Conservatives' electoral dominance in 1964.¹⁹ This chapter will attempt to demonstrate exactly how and why this process made itself felt in the 1960s, a period when governments of all types increasingly came under pressure to deliver on their lofty promises.

Crichel Down, the Franks Report and Stephan Hurwitz's campaign

Two more incidents – one familiar to most scholars of British public administration, and one less so – also highlight just these themes, as well as helping to bring Johnson's unlikely crusade to fruition. The first of these was the notorious 'Crichel Down' case, which had caused the Minister of Agriculture, Sir Thomas Dugdale, to resign in 1954.²⁰ This became a *cause célèbre* because it seemed to provide a programmatic example of a formalised and unfeeling bureaucracy in action. Any controversy over the compulsory purchase and government use of hitherto private land, just as the political parties were engaged in deep-seated ideological conflicts about the Conservatives' liberalisation of Labour's 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, could only be deeply divisive.²¹ The government wished, above all, to make sure that they did not attract the type of political damage that had been inflicted by the so-called Pilgrim case, in which a landowner committed suicide because his holdings were compulsorily purchased at a price well below that which he had paid for it. The ensuing scandal helped the Conservatives pass new Town and Country Planning Acts in 1953 and 1954, and to present these Acts as liberalising measures that would prevent such cases from happening again. But left- and right-wing critics alike still attacked these measures as a set of unsatisfactory compromises that would not solve the dilemmas of land-use planning.²²

The details of the Crichel Down case itself are relatively straightforward. In 1937 the Air Ministry purchased 725 acres of land, near Long Crichel in Dorset, for use as a bombing range. In 1949, the land was handed to the Ministry of Agriculture – though apparently without the requisite order – despite promises that it would be offered to the Crichel Down landowners who had owned it in the first place. It was then let out to other tenants, over the objections of the original owner of large parts of the land, a Lieutenant-Commander Marten. Inquiries appointed both by the Ministry of Agriculture and the Prime Minister found that officials involved had made significant mistakes, both in trying to re-equip the estate as a single entity and then offering the land for rent without a public tender.²³ The Franks Committee was not appointed just because of Crichel Down, but due to wider Conservative unease about the whole system of land-use planning and appeals. Indeed, because there was no statutory tribunal for Marten to appeal to, only planning appeals heard by Ministry officials, the case was

strictly outside the remit of any new administrative machinery Franks could recommend. But the case and the inquiry stimulated a great deal of public discussion over civil servants' apparently arbitrary powers.²⁴

The final report of the Franks Committee recommended reform of the tribunal system, rather than any more wide-ranging constitutional changes. Two Councils on Tribunals, one for Scotland and one for England and Wales, were to be set up 'to keep the constitution and working of tribunals under constant review'. Individuals should be more clearly apprised of their rights, the committee recommended; more deliberation and consultation were inserted into the process of issuing and enforcing compulsory purchase orders.²⁵ These relatively narrow changes – although they involved for the first time the regularisation and creation of synoptic purpose among Britain's *ad hoc* tribunal process – were to be expected, given the committee's brief. As the Permanent Secretary at the Lord Chancellor's Department noted privately, Franks' terms of reference had been 'deliberately drawn so as to exclude any review of administrative decisions generally, on the ground that this would interfere unduly with the responsibility of the Executive and its answerability to Parliament'.²⁶

Even so, the introduction to the Franks Report made clear that the committee's members were deeply concerned with 'the procedures by which the rights of individual citizens can be harmonised with wider public interests', and with 'the right relationship between authority and the individual'.²⁷ Others would now take up the wider question of ministerial decisions that seemed to run counter to governments' own rules, for the whole debate had stirred many observers to think about wider remedies for administrative abuses. The leading Oxford legal academic F.H. Lawson, for instance, published an article in the 1957 edition of the specialist journal on *Public Law* calling for an 'Inspector-General of Administration'. Lawson specifically rejected the more radical ideas espoused by some of Franks' witnesses, for instance the creation of a general Administrative Appeal Tribunal to watch over civil service and government in place of the courts. But his Inspector-General would still have had wide legal powers to pursue those responsible for improper or illegal acts – many more, in fact, than the Ombudsman eventually acquired.²⁸

Crichel Down and the Franks Report are well-known signposts. Less famous are two visits by a vigorous and campaigning Danish public servant. Stephan Hurwitz had been selected to be Denmark's first Ombudsman in 1955, under the country's new 1953 constitution. He visited Britain in 1958 to give lectures and talks promoting his office in London, Manchester, Oxford, Nottingham and Bristol.²⁹ Johnson later recorded that it was a visit to Denmark, during the Whitsun Parliamentary recess of 1959, 'which sowed the random seed which was to blossom in such promising fashion in subsequent years', partly due to the impressions he drew from a meeting with Hurwitz himself.³⁰ Hurwitz toured Britain again in 1960, and

he made exactly the same case.³¹ The Danish Ombudsman stated on the BBC's Third Programme that he had 'to a great extent penetrated' both the Crichton Down case and the Franks Report. He would, he went on, have had much more wide-ranging powers of investigation in both the cases of the original maladministration and in terms of the eventual recommendations for reform.³² Hurwitz made a deep impression on many he met, and seems to have had an extremely persuasive personality. He emphasised the role of publicity in his work in an essay for *Public Law* in 1958, the same year as his lecture tour.³³ Tom Sargant, the secretary of the legal pressure group Justice, noted that 'there has been some excellent publicity of the right kind for Hurwitz's visit. The degree of interest aroused ... is really quite staggering. He has been besieged by radio and TV.'³⁴ Another Ombudsman later called him 'a man of magic ... who had bewitched the world. Because he has aroused so much admiration, the office he holds has seemed to be even more significant than it really is.'³⁵

The idea had impeccable Scandinavian precedents, for Sweden had set up an Ombudsman as long ago as 1809, before the growth of the state, and the concomitant range of bureaucratic decision-making, and had recommended the idea to other northern states.³⁶ Finland had established its own Ombudsman in 1919, with powers of investigation into the church and local authorities as well as central government.³⁷ Norway set up its own complaints officer in 1962, who then began work in January 1963 – though the institution in that country had much less freedom of manoeuvre, and was much more dependent on Parliament, than in Sweden and Denmark.³⁸ The fact that even Scandinavian countries, famous for their good governance as well as for social and political liberty, might require independent checks and balances made a deep impression across the English-speaking world. As the Canadian academic Donald Rowat put it, 'if countries like Finland and Sweden ... find it necessary in addition to have not one, but two special institutions to investigate complaints of official arbitrariness, then it is all the more necessary that we should have at least one similar defender of the law'.³⁹

For a few years, the idea of the Ombudsman appeared almost everywhere on the political scene. The Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers discussed the idea in 1960; in July 1964 the Young Fabians organised a seminar on the idea with Louis Blom-Cooper, the legal commentator for *The Guardian* and *The Observer*.⁴⁰ Young Conservatives, for instance, accepted the case for an Ombudsman in *Law, Liberty and Licence*, their 1964 pamphlet on the reform of legal and government institutions.⁴¹ ABC Television aired a programme on 'The Citizen with a Grievance', which included an interview with Johnson, in 1965.⁴² The left-of-centre political economist Andrew Shonfield, whose *Modern Capitalism* was extremely influential on its publication in 1965, praised the idea as a tool of 'bureaucratic humanity', 'pushing the modern administration beyond mere justice, towards the recognition

of a duty of active kindness in ... society'.⁴³ The political scientist Brian Chapman, very sceptical about the idea, even argued that enthusiasm for this reform was in danger of becoming a 'cult'; Lord Tenby, the Chairman of the Council on Tribunals, argued similarly against the development of 'Ombudsman fever'.⁴⁴ Martin Ennals of the National Council for Civil Liberties, who later became Secretary-General of Amnesty International, told the Parliamentary Civil Liberties Group in 1965 that 'during the past two years the word Ombudsman has become more of a slogan than a serious political concept'.⁴⁵

Another critical factor making for this 'cult' and 'fever' was that the Nordic model had been transmitted through a Commonwealth – and common law – state, namely New Zealand. That country had always been seen as a 'laboratory of democracy', having brought in women's suffrage in 1893, created a Court of Arbitration in 1894 and enacted an Old Age Pensions Act in 1898.⁴⁶ The transmission of Scandinavian ideas through another imagined semi-utopia, and one perhaps much closer to the British constitutional system, made them even more powerful. The occasion for this transfer was a United Nations seminar on remedies for administrative abuses, held in Kandy, Sri Lanka, during May 1959. Hurwitz, a key speaker, concluded his own paper to the conference with the confident assertion that 'the new institution ... has been and will be able to help in building or rather maintaining a sound administration in Danish democracy'.⁴⁷

Hurwitz's talk made an enormous impression on one of the audience: John Robson, New Zealand's official Deputy Secretary for Justice, and one of the country's most activist and powerful civil servants.⁴⁸ When the centre-right National Party returned to power after New Zealand's 1960 General Election, Robson met with the new Minister for Justice, Ralph Hanan, and briefed him on both the Kandy seminar and the Danish Ombudsman.⁴⁹ He also publicised Hurwitz's Kandy paper by sending it to the editor of New Zealand's *Political Science* journal, which published it in the autumn of 1960.⁵⁰ This led to the creation of New Zealand's first Ombudsman in 1962, and the appointment of Sir Guy Powles to that office: the progress of this legislation, and then the office it created, was closely followed in the Lord Chancellor's office back in London.⁵¹ Elwyn Jones, Labour's Attorney General when the party regained power in 1964, travelled to New Zealand to study the new Parliamentary Commissioner at work. So did Sir Edmund Compton when he was eventually appointed to that office in the UK.⁵²

'Justice' and the Conservatives: the lawyers enter the debate

The creation of the pressure group Justice in 1957, following a visit by many of its early activists to witness ANC 'treason' trials in South Africa and the suppression of the 1956 Hungarian uprising, was to be another crucial step towards setting up a British Ombudsman.⁵³ Justice was already primed for

just such research, especially in its international work on human rights. Sargant had attended the International Commission of Jurists' conference on the 'Rule of Law' in New Delhi during 1959. The conference had as one of its main topics the relationship between the citizen and the state, asking: 'what remedies ... are available to the individual who has suffered damage as a result of [government] acts of omission or commission?'⁵⁴ Lawson's article in the 1957 volume of *Public Law* first stimulated discussion of administrative law among members of Justice, with several meetings held on the idea during 1958. Requests were sent to lawyers in Sweden, Denmark and Norway – and to over 50 British correspondents – for more information.⁵⁵ Lawson himself was too busy to be involved, but a subcommittee of younger lawyers including the Young Socialist Gordon Borrie, who later went on to chair Labour's Social Justice Commission in the 1990s, did examine the question.⁵⁶ It was the impetus given by Justice to the creation of a *constitutional* and *legal* office that helped give the office of Ombudsman just that character, rather than the more informal clearing-house for complaint and advice that the Citizens' Advice Bureaux movement and others advocated.⁵⁷

The Franks Report further encouraged the concept of addressing the individual's relationship with government in a formal and legal manner, though specific recommendations were delayed somewhat once the idea had been referred to this committee. During 1958 and 1959 an informal group began to form consisting of Sargant, the lawyer Peter Benenson – later to found Amnesty International – the legal academic and author Stanley de Smith, Blom-Cooper and Alistair Macdonald, Secretary to the Council on Tribunals. Despite persistent funding setbacks, they and Lord Shawcross, Justice's chairman and previously Britain's chief prosecutor at Nuremberg, decided to go ahead with the appointment of an expert committee on the 'Ombudsman project'.⁵⁸ This was the background to the appointment, in 1959, of a Justice inquiry into the whole matter, chaired by Sir John Whyatt, the former Attorney General of Kenya and Chief Justice of Singapore. The other members of the committee were Shawcross himself; Norman Marsh, Director of the British Institute of International and Comparative Law; Sir Sydney Caine, Director of the LSE; and the Cambridge legal academic William Wade.⁵⁹

Their eventual report – with a foreword by Franks himself – did indeed call for the creation of a British 'Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration', though the committee were careful to avoid the word 'Ombudsman' in favour of a domestic and 'British' office. This Parliamentary officer, modelled administratively on the Comptroller and Auditor General, would have powers to look into 'official misconduct in the sense that the administrative authority responsible for the act or decision complained of has failed to observe proper standards of conduct and behaviour when exercising his administrative powers'. This would *not* involve areas of discretionary choice on the part of ministers or civil servants where there were no clear rules, or

in cases where the complaint was that their decision was misguided rather than maladministered – distinctions that were to become central to the debate over the office of Parliamentary Commissioner as it was eventually instituted. An MP would also have to refer the case to the Parliamentary Commissioner.⁶⁰ That said, Whyatt's ideas gained a relatively good public reception. *The Times* in general welcomed the recommendation of a new but 'thoroughly British institution', while *The Economist* argued that 'the important thing now is to push its main ideas ... through into parliamentary action'.⁶¹

Moved by both this press coverage and by Parliamentary Questions, ministers then asked a group of officials to consider the question.⁶² This committee met under the Cabinet Secretary Sir Burke Trend in the first half of 1962, but came down decisively against the idea. Trend and his colleagues initially identified a number of areas where new appeals procedures might be set up, particularly in those areas – Agriculture, Education, the Home Office, Health and the Board of Trade – where discretionary decisions were a necessary part of 'day-to-day' official life.⁶³ But civil servants balked at setting up a whole new body to work in the areas where they still did not think tribunals or appeals were possible. Swedish ministers were not responsible to Parliament for their departments' day-to-day work, they argued: this vital link in Britain's constitution would be threatened by transplanting a separate office to look into 'maladministration'. In short, 'the appointment would be incompatible with the doctrine of ministerial accountability as practised in this country'.⁶⁴ Trend had started by asking departments what they thought of the Ombudsman idea, and 'what cases, within, say, the last ten years, have occasioned a significant degree of public protest ... [owing to] maladministration'.⁶⁵ He had received an entirely predictable tide of negative responses, and denials that many cases would ever have qualified anyway. Sir Laurence Helsby, still at this point Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Labour but in 1963 to become head of the civil service, argued in his reply that 'investigations undertaken indiscriminately, maybe on the basis of trivial complaints, could disrupt the orderly conduct of public business'. Only five departments raised no objections to the idea.⁶⁶

The Treasury Solicitor, Sir Harold Kent, did attend a conference on Ombudsmen held in Stockholm during June 1962. Even so, he returned more secure than ever in the view that Trend's committee was coming to the right conclusions, given the much stronger and more deep-rooted 'respect for the law' that was the hallmark of British jurisdictions:

Restraints were imposed by administrative action in Sweden which would never be tolerated here without a court order, and ... chiefs of police took liberties with the law which would be unthinkable here. In this connection we were told at the seminar that criminals were shipped back and forth over the Malmö ferry between Denmark and Sweden, without the

formality of extradition, and that this convenient practice was stopped by the ... [Ombudsman]. The United Kingdom officials' respect for legality is too deep-rooted for this kind of thing.⁶⁷

Kent left other delegates with the – entirely accurate – impression that he actively opposed any such experiment, public scepticism that allowed Johnson to ask yet another of his Parliamentary Questions inquiring about the progress of the Ombudsman idea.⁶⁸ The government's rejection of the Whyatt Report was announced in Parliament in November 1962, over a year after Justice had published its findings.⁶⁹

The government now appeared to be resisting the future: Justice argued that some such office would be created soon whatever the Conservatives said.⁷⁰ These were potentially very damaging charges for a government that was attempting to pose as a 'modernising', European and liberal-conservative administration. There were signs of a tentative reappraisal on the Conservatives' part just before the 1964 General Election. The new Prime Minister, Alec Douglas-Home, attempted to revive the Ombudsman concept at that point, as he sensed that Labour might make an issue of his government's refusal to consider the idea. But he met with a resounding set of negative responses from his colleagues. Sir John Hobson, the Attorney General, doubted 'very much whether the Socialists would do anything to implement ... the Whyatt Committee's recommendations', while other ministers simply doubted that the public would be interested.⁷¹

Labour legislates on the Ombudsman

This view, which associated 'Socialists' only with bureaucracy and controls, proved to be misguided. Labour had in fact given the idea a great deal of thought in Opposition, in order to differentiate itself from an 'out of touch' Conservative government that would not listen to the public or let the public participate in the making of the 'New Britain'.⁷² The party set up a special group of its National Executive Committee to look at the problem in December 1963, and its deliberations show clear traces of this new agenda.⁷³ The group's first chair, Douglas Houghton, was an extreme sceptic about the idea, ironically since he was to be given responsibility for codifying Labour's proposals once they returned to office. 'I am simply not convinced,' he argued in a long and contrary memorandum: if tribunals, the police, the courts, the armed forces, cases subject to legal redress and medical decisions were all excluded, 'the residual problem of citizen versus bureaucracy is not only relatively narrow but is really taken care of by existing means of obtaining redress'. Morgan Phillips, Labour's General Secretary until 1961, had taken a similar view.⁷⁴

Houghton and Phillips did not get their way, and Labour's committee decided to recommend a commitment to the Ombudsman in the party's

manifesto. The Research Department stymied Houghton's efforts to defeat the idea by producing a very long memorandum detailing just the 'evidence of need' he had refused to believe existed – a long list of imbroglios during which the public had been shut out of official decisions, even after they had complained about their implications. Inconsistent compensation payments and a failure to take account of illness when farmers were late in lodging grant claims were just two of these incidents. The latter example was all the more damaging to the *status quo* because the farm payments system was supposed to take account of individual circumstances. MPs – Houghton's vaunted channel for citizens' complaint and redress – had refused to take up the great majority of these cases.⁷⁵

Once Labour was returned to power in 1964, ministers' and officials' attention moved on to turning a pre-election Wilson speech at Stowmarket into legislative reality. Two committees were formed to look into the idea, one made up of ministers, ironically with Douglas Houghton as chairman, and the other consisting of officials sitting under the Treasury civil servant Sir Philip Allen.⁷⁶ It was at this stage that officials reinserted Whyatt's idea of a Parliamentary 'filter', which had been deliberately ignored during the Labour NEC's deliberations. Allen and his colleagues considered alternatives, but concluded that given the size of the UK as against New Zealand, there might be 20,000 complaints a year – far too many for any new office to handle without a screening mechanism to filter out easy cases. 'An optional arrangement for access preferably through Members of Parliament but otherwise directly to the Commissioner', they reported, was 'unlikely to be of much value as a shield for him; we can see no satisfactory means of inducing complainants to go through Members of Parliament'.⁷⁷ Houghton's ministerial group also came to the same conclusion, though with more difficulty: a minority in the committee (including the chairman) initially argued for open access to the new commissioner.⁷⁸

The full Cabinet was told that any other system would endanger one of MPs' main tasks: by allowing the public to appeal to the Ombudsman only through their elected representatives, 'the Ombudsman in Britain would be brought within the framework of our Parliamentary practice'.⁷⁹ So the 'filter' stood, and the Ombudsman was not to be allowed to take complaints himself. Labour's White Paper, moreover, emphasised that the new Commissioner would concentrate on administration, not policy, and would have to report to Parliament – which would then itself decide on the appropriate nature of restorative action. The Parliamentary system, the MP 'filter' and the strengthening of 'existing constitutional arrangements', were all evoked. 'In Britain, Parliament is the place for ventilating the grievances of the citizen', the paper argued, 'by history, tradition, and past and present practice'.⁸⁰

Even so, Justice in general welcomed both the White Paper and the subsequent Bill, pleased that some measure at least was to be passed. The pressure

group limited its criticism to detail, rather than commenting on principles. They called, for instance, for the Bill to be clear about whether the Ombudsman had the right to initiate inquiries on his own behalf.⁸¹ But in several instances, the government had been more radical than Whyatt. The Ombudsman was to have complete access to all the relevant files in a case, including those of the Cabinet – subject to a ministerial veto on security grounds as to which documents were actually cited in public reports. The Houghton subcommittee had also decided that ministers were not to have the power of veto over an investigation, as Whyatt had recommended. The British Ombudsman was also allowed to criticise ministers' personal actions or decisions – a power that was absent in the New Zealand legislation.⁸² Ministers found it impossible to settle on a definition of 'maladministration': the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration (PCA) himself was to define this in practice, allowing the office's role to grow and change and to civil servants' chagrin.⁸³ The Leader of the House of Commons, Richard Crossman, offered instead examples of what *might* be included under that heading: 'bias, neglect, inattention, delay, incompetence, inaptitude, perversity, turpitude [or] arbitrariness'.⁸⁴

Wilson's next step was the relatively unusual announcement of an appointment to an office that did not yet exist: partly to install his own favoured candidate, and partly to show that the government still took the measure seriously.⁸⁵ Wilson's choice, Edmund Compton, was an experienced Whitehall 'insider'. He had served as Lord Beaverbrook's Private Secretary during the Second World War and had been appointed as Comptroller and Auditor General in 1958.⁸⁶ Wilson had been impressed with him during his time as Shadow Chancellor and Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee. They met twice a week to co-ordinate their oversight of government expenditure, Wilson giving Compton the nickname of 'the Elf' because of his small stature and quick-wittedness. Marcia Williams, Wilson's powerful and unpredictable political secretary, later wrote that Compton was 'needle-bright, very witty, warm-hearted, and without the "edge" so often found in top civil servants'.⁸⁷ He had, even so, to overcome his initial reluctance, 'chiefly', as it was reported to Wilson, 'because he had some doubts about the need for the new organisation'.⁸⁸ He had already fought off the idea of expanding the Comptroller and Auditor General's remit while Labour was still in Opposition.⁸⁹

The Treasury was asked to carry the Bill through Parliament, since it was responsible for machinery of government issues in the years before the creation of the Civil Service Department in 1968. This was a critical decision, for had the Bill been given to Crossman, responsible himself for the conduct of business in the Commons, it might have been much more radical. Crossman was one of those Bevanite thinkers marked out by his acute concern about 'the gigantic size of the modern unit of organisation'.⁹⁰ The minister responsible, Niall MacDermot, admitted one night during the passage of the Bill

that he was 'not sure' it would make a great deal of difference: Crossman 'went home, my bowels turning with anger because all my worst suspicions had been confirmed ... MacDermot has been working for the Treasury and the Treasury has been ... stripping the Ombudsman of any effective powers.'⁹¹ This was rather unfair to MacDermot, who had engaged in a lively correspondence with Justice while still in Opposition, and whose private views were rather more radical than those he espoused as the government's representative in these debates. He was, for instance, convinced himself of the need for direct access to the PCA.⁹²

Even so, MacDermot's efforts on behalf of the Bill were more business-like, industrious and managerial than particularly passionate or enthusiastic. This was partly due to the fact that much thinking had already been done: the starting point in actually drafting the Bill was a familiar one, and New Zealand was, as ever, the exemplar. Parliamentary Counsel was briefed, not with the Swedish or Danish statutes, but with the New Zealand Act.⁹³ And once the Bill was launched, it passed through Parliament with very few changes. MacDermot managed to rebuff Conservative attempts to delete the MP 'filter', and Labour MPs' amendments that would have erased the list of 'excluded departments' and replaced it with a clear list of those departments and functions that could be investigated.⁹⁴

One critical set of disputes over the Bill concerned 'discretionary decisions' – conclusions reached by government ministers or by officials which were matters of judgement, however controversial, and in which there was no evidence of any of the failings listed in the 'Crossman catalogue'. MacDermot inserted a clause in the end of the Bill's section on 'matters subject to investigation' stipulating that 'discretionary decisions' were not to be questioned.⁹⁵ A Conservative attempt explicitly to spell out that the PCA could examine these decisions for maladministration was then defeated in committee.⁹⁶ Crossman was furious, and MacDermot's continual defence of the 'discretionary powers' clause deepened his belief that the Treasury was yet again 'pulling a fast one ... despite [MacDermot's] assurances the amendment was designed to cut down the number of cases the ombudsman could deal with'.⁹⁷ Lord Gardiner, the Lord Chancellor and an early member of Justice, was asked to move and alter the offending clause to make clear that the Ombudsman could look into any case he chose, and that only *after* excluding maladministration could he conclude that he was looking at that 'discretionary' part of any decision that remained outside his brief. Gardiner duly steered the requisite amendment through the Lords.⁹⁸

This distinction, easily misrepresented as meaning that no ministerial decision was open to question by the PCA, caused many supporters of the Ombudsman idea to see the Bill as a betrayal of their initial purpose. Utley despaired of Labour's proposals as soon as this exemption for 'discretionary powers' became clear. 'Every branch of government', he argued, 'ought to be conducted in permanent awe of some notion, however imprecisely

defined, of fundamental law': the Ombudsman should be able to take account of the general principles under which decisions had been made.⁹⁹ Quintin Hogg, leading for the Conservatives in the debates on the Bill, made enormous capital out of this confusion, and the other exclusions Labour had included. 'Anyone who contemplates an office of this kind', Hogg argued at Third Reading, 'is faced with the dilemma of making it either a Frankenstein or a nonentity – a Frankenstein if it has effective powers and a nonentity if it has not. The Government, quite rightly, has opted for its being a nonentity, and in that sense it is a fraud.'¹⁰⁰ Even some Labour MPs were sceptical – for instance, the social and legal reformer Leo Abse, who continued to believe that the Ombudsman might undermine MPs' role while not really opening up novel routes for complaint.¹⁰¹ In fact, it proved impossible in practice – as Whyatt and Crossman foresaw – to draw the line where hard and fast rules and regulations ended, and 'discretionary powers' began. Only the Commissioner's findings in each case could be any guide. As the Treasury informed the Board of Trade: 'we doubt whether any description of discretionary powers ... could be made sufficiently clear to have any marked effect ... we shall have to depend very much on the good sense of the Commissioner himself'.¹⁰²

Public sector personnel issues were excluded from the Bill, since officials were nearly as worried about civil service trade unions' reaction to the Act as they were about any point of principle. Most of the government's advisers believed that the unions would not accept any innovation that would weaken their negotiating hand on the existing Whitley Councils that negotiated pay and conditions.¹⁰³ This decision regarding personnel matters was upheld even when the Ministry of Education tried to reopen it in regard to their responsibility for teachers' pay and pensions after the 1966 General Election. Other departments, particularly the Ministry of Health, feared that this would allow any and all state employees to complain to the Ombudsman.¹⁰⁴

The Select Committee shadowing the Parliamentary Commissioner attempted on a number of occasions to reverse this decision, for instance in 1972. The MPs involved argued that this was an arbitrary choice of subject for exclusion: why, they asked, should the administration of pensions and contracts be different from any other bureaucratic decision, simply because private sector complaints would have to go through the courts?¹⁰⁵ About 10 per cent of all complaints turned away by the PCA in the first decade of his operations concerned public sector workers.¹⁰⁶ Some ministers concurred: in 1967 Crossman allowed himself to say in public that he favoured a complaints commissioner for the armed forces, which gained him one of his periodic Prime Ministerial rebukes.¹⁰⁷ But successive governments steadfastly refused to allow civil servants to appeal to the Ombudsman – partly because, as officials had intuited, the unions on the Whitley Council's Staff Side resolutely opposed the Select Committee's recommendations. These

issues, they told MPs, were part of their 'continuing responsibility ... the Staff Side and the associations would not wish to see any external procedure introduced which might weaken support for the services now provided'.¹⁰⁸

The Ombudsman: a confined but expanding role

Hogg's jibes seemed at first to have been well aimed. The PCA's workload initially showed some tendency to decline over time, partly because Compton did not regard publicising his office as an integral part of his job – though other Ombudsmen also experienced this initial dip in their work as they cleared any backlog of grievances.¹⁰⁹ The numbers of people complaining per head of population were rather low compared to those bringing their grievances to Ombudsmen in other countries.¹¹⁰ Compton himself issued only three special reports during his time in office, and tended to regard his audience as Parliamentary rather than the public. Michael Winstanley, the Liberal MP for Cheadle between 1964 and 1970 and who served on the Select Committee throughout his time in Parliament, thought his first report in particular 'a damp squib'.¹¹¹

Peter Dorey has recently emphasised Labour's 'constitutional conservatism' and 'lack of clear thinking' in terms of House of Commons reform, as well as in other spheres: the reform of Parliament's hours of sitting, and the creation of 'expert' Select Committees, both ran into sustained opposition and slowed markedly as the first two Wilson governments battled through successive economic crises.¹¹² The indirect manner of complaint referral, and the lack of direct access to the Ombudsman, have always been the subject of negative comment, as we have seen.¹¹³ Many academic experts argued at the time that the government had 'botched' the Act.¹¹⁴ Justice remained unhappy that the PCA's role never went as far, or as fast, as they would have liked. Their review of the system, published in 1977, argued that the office did not gain enough publicity, still needed the MP 'filter' removed, was understaffed and required additional powers.¹¹⁵ The press also launched successive attacks on the PCA. Was he 'an Ombudsman or an Ombudsmouse?', asked the *Daily Mirror* in March 1967. The *Sunday Express* called him a 'paper tiger'; the *Telegraph* a 'hamstrung knight'; *The Sun* 'a watchdog in chains'.¹¹⁶ Hugo Young regretted the 'vanishing' of the Ombudsman in the *Sunday Times*, while *The Economist* thought the Parliamentary debates about discretionary power 'ridiculous' and called for the whole scheme to be scrapped.¹¹⁷

In fact, the 1967 Act initiated a cascading process of change that had not abated even by the early twenty-first century. Some limited administrative devolution was noticeable, for a separate branch office opened in Edinburgh, encouraging complaints in that country's rather different legal environment.¹¹⁸ And although the number of grievances received did decline until 1972, when only 548 were received, they then began a slow but

sustained recovery until 9415 properly formatted complaints were received by the combined Parliamentary and Health Service Commissioner during 2008–9.¹¹⁹ The third Parliamentary Commissioner, Sir Idwal Pugh, was particularly notable in effecting subtle changes to the office's powers. Rather than simply referring directly complainants back to their MPs, he now began to write back and inform correspondents that he would take their case direct to members of the Commons. Pugh also stopped taking advice from the Treasury Solicitor, instead employing private counsel, while also arguing that government decisions that were manifestly 'unreasonable' also fell within his brief. Some of the implications of the 'filter', and the 'insider' nature of the office, were therefore softened.¹²⁰

Another area in which subtle changes began to occur was in terms of what became known as the 'bad rule' and the 'bad decision'. Compton initially tried to limit his caseload to instances where he could actually demonstrate maladministration: that is, where the paperwork showed that ministers or officials had been improperly briefed, or had gone against their own rules.¹²¹ Officials at first noted with satisfaction that 'the PCA has in practice taken a moderate line in interpreting the "bad decision" and the "bad rule", and we have had no single complaint about his practice from any Department'.¹²² But the Parliamentary Select Committee reported in 1968 that, in the first place, 'the instances of maladministration found by the Commissioner might have been more in number and less trivial in content if he had allowed himself to find an occasion that a decision had been taken with maladministration because it was a bad decision'. Second, decisions might be challenged if the rule applied was in itself a bad one in the context of other regulations and customs.¹²³ Direct evidence of poor decision-making would not then necessarily be required; the impact of a crass or ignorant *fiat*, and its distance from the normal application of the rules, could then be taken into account.¹²⁴

The government's law officers concluded that it was impossible to resist this move on the part of the Select Committee, and, in any case, both they and the PCA thought that a new look at 'bad decisions' would 'make virtually no difference' to his work: the PCA himself would still decide which cases to examine.¹²⁵ But the 'bad rule' did involve some expansion of the office's work: Compton himself started to look at general cases, such as standards on aircraft noise, in order to restrain the more radical implications of this new approach.¹²⁶

'Maladministration', as Crossman had always intended, proved to be a capacious and malleable category that the Ombudsman could look into. In general, the opaque approach had provided the office with a wide freedom of manoeuvre, rather than limiting its power. The courts have continuously upheld the Ombudsman's discretion to act – or not act – as he sees fit, as defined in the Act.¹²⁷ The fourth PCA, Cecil Clothier, told *New Society* in 1981 that 'maladministration' was a 'concept ... [that was] as long as a piece

of string', allowing him to ensure that 'the spin-off is vastly greater than the sum of the individual cases'. The Commissioners' ever more evident habit of publicising their more general views as to good, rather than bad, administration allowed them increasing leeway to investigate and argue as they liked – though this ran the risk that the large headlines that would make the office more visible came only from the worst and most sensational cases.¹²⁸ Gradually, the number of authors calling for the PCA to possess more specific, better-defined and more binding powers declined as the all-encompassing potential of the 1967 Act became clearer.

This creeping remit was also evident in the 1972 and 1973 Acts that set up the office of Health Service Commissioner. The HSC was allowed to examine 'service failure', in which a health authority failed to provide facilities they were obliged to.¹²⁹ By the end of the twentieth century the United Kingdom authorities were overseen by no less than 24 different 'Ombudsmen', including the Police Complaints Commission, a Prisons Ombudsman and a Banking Ombudsman.¹³⁰ The PCA himself was dealing with more than 2000 complaints a year, and grappling with some long-running and acute political controversies. The malfunctioning Child Support Agency, for instance, constituted 15 per cent of all complaints in 1997/98, including appalling cases where abusive husbands had been forwarded the new surnames and addresses of their ex-partners.¹³¹ It is unlikely that any of the individuals who have been assisted in these cases feel the Ombudsman to be an irrelevance – among them, the 700 complaints that led to the present Ombudsman's castigation of government pensions advice in 2006, and the 2288 Equitable Life claimants she has campaigned for.¹³²

The devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have set up their own Ombudsmen, as well as unifying the new offices overseeing the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies with the health service and local government Ombudsmen for those jurisdictions. In so doing they have continued the tradition of the commissioners' expanding remit, for these new bodies – like the HSC – can examine 'service failure' as well as 'maladministration' strictly defined.¹³³ The Children's Commissioners for Wales, Scotland and England – appointed in that order between 2001 and 2005 – also owe much to the creation of a Norwegian Ombudsman for Children in 1981.¹³⁴ Ombudsmen have – as Stephen Owen, British Columbia's Ombudsman between 1986 and 1991, argues – 'taken firm hold as an instrument of democratic accountability between the individual and the administrative state'.¹³⁵

Conclusions: Ombudsmen, 'neutral' politics and 'Europeanisation'

New histories of those institutions that linked together administrators, expert practitioners and the wider public may help widen our sense of the

rising and usually unmet expectations of 'voice' over 'loyalty' in an increasingly consumerist welfare state – the first area of investigation identified at the start of this chapter. Such studies have been relatively few and far between, in Britain at least. Matthew Hilton has demonstrated the different conceptions of citizenship that surrounded the work of the Molony Committee on Consumer Protection, which deliberated between 1959 and 1962 – though his work has more closely concerned the state's role in regulating the private market than in governing the delivery of the services for which it is responsible.¹³⁶ James Vernon and Peter Atkins have analysed the politics of school milk and school meals – ideologies of literal consumption in the welfare state.¹³⁷ Christine Hogg's work on conflicting concepts of consumerism, participation and the NHS stands as another example of the subtle intermixes of public and private precepts that might be traced out.¹³⁸ Elsewhere in the literature, however, the word 'consumer' has until very recently referred to the purchaser in the private market – perhaps due to a long-standing belief that consumerism and citizenship were and are conflicting ideas rather than concepts that are in constant flux and interplay, one with the other.¹³⁹

Early and famous cases taken by the Ombudsman seemed to show just how unresponsive Westminster and Whitehall could be, and how citizenship could be defined through the reception of benefits or the protection of purchase: the Sachsenhausen case, which involved British POWs refused compensation for their time in a concentration camp, was a case in point. The press coverage when the Ombudsman found Foreign Office 'maladministration', and the government made a series of humbling one-off payments, was appalling.¹⁴⁰ Another example was the Court Line case, in which the incoming Labour government had in 1974 announced the effective nationalisation of the conglomerate's shipbuilding interests and announced its future was secure, only to see the package holiday parts of the group collapse with thousands of British citizens stranded abroad.¹⁴¹

The second cluster of broad historical interest is intertwined with this gathering sense of the state as a service provider. The creation of the Ombudsman also allows historians to examine and critique the rise of expert and disinterested checks on executive action. To return to Pierre Rosanvallon's typology, the Ombudsman combined what Rosanvallon terms 'functional capabilities', embodied in investigation and in the seeking of redress; a new 'ethos', of public complaint and non-legalistic solutions; and novel 'social activities': in this case, the publicity Ombudsmen increasingly sought for their casework and recommendations. The office appeared to provide one answer to the social democratic dilemma of how to ensure both quality and choice in public services – or at least a way of encouraging the public to join that search.¹⁴² But given Sachsenhausen and Court Line, and the initial sense of disappointment with the 1967 Act, it seemed as if the new Parliamentary Commissioner had done little to narrow the gap

between the government and the people, as Wilson and Michael Stewart had hoped. It had, on the contrary, highlighted the difficulties of governing a *dirigiste* economy and a complex welfare state. Successive governments' failure to respond quickly to the PCA's novel capabilities, attitudes and activities seemed to make the social democratic dilemma even more problematic than before.

The Ombudsman was and is, lastly, yet another good example of how deep and abiding the Scandinavian influence remained in British public life. Though adapted for 'British' uses as lawyers and politicians saw it, it bore at least a recognisable relation to its Nordic forebear. It has latterly become difficult to recall the enormous hopes and dreams vested in the Nordic example in the post-war era.¹⁴³ But it is vital to reconstruct the manner in which the region embodied what Mary Hilson has termed a 'utopic discourse' of progress during the 1950s and 1960s – rational yet participatory, serious and moral while retaining a certain austere glamour.¹⁴⁴ An awareness of these influences might provide a good check to the transatlantic outlook of historians in an era when governing elites have often looked to the United States for policy advice and approval.¹⁴⁵

Following up these lines of inquiry should also alert historians to the manner in which international networks certainly did *not* make policy-making a simple matter of copying other countries' experience. The Parliamentary Commissioner's early travails over such cases as Sachsenhausen and Court Line, undermining rather than embedding 'trust', make the point eloquently enough. The British Ombudsman's own particular characteristics are also evidence of this: it is a fallacy to look for change only among what Jose Harris has termed 'the more abstract, legalistic, and impersonal sphere of institutions campaigning for universal "human rights"'.¹⁴⁶ The best studies among recent transnational work have emphasised that there are many areas where normative or mimetic copying does *not* occur, and may actually achieve results different or even opposite to those intended: copies of 'foreign' models emerge, if at all, within new and specific political systems that may alter or transform the model that is being 'copied'.¹⁴⁷ The process of institutional isomorphism, by which administrative and political systems converge on one another under the pressure of professionalisation, growing complexity and uncertainty, must be conjoined with a sense of the episodic and individual.¹⁴⁸ Johnson, Marten and Hurwitz might otherwise have campaigned for little indeed.

7

Sir Alec Cairncross and the Art and Craft of Economic Advice, 1961–69

The appointment of Alec Cairncross as Chief Economic Adviser

In June 1961 Alexander (or 'Alec') Cairncross was appointed to the post of Chief Economic Adviser to Her Majesty's Government and Head of the Economic Section of the Treasury. Cairncross, a Scot from a relatively humble Lanarkshire background, was a fairly moderate and deliberately uncontroversial choice, partly because he had already made a name for himself as an expert across a wide range of administrative and economic jobs. He possessed a great deal of experience within Whitehall, having left Glasgow University to join the Central Economic Information Service in 1940 – serving, therefore, in the nucleus of what later became the Economic Section of the Cabinet Office, and then the Treasury.¹ There Cairncross mainly worked on imports, shipping, transport and raw materials, he and his fellow economist Ely Devons occupying 'the attic of Richmond Terrace, furnished with an empty grate, a bare table, two chairs, a filing cabinet and an ancient calculating machine'.² From there he moved to the Board of Trade, before joining the Ministry of Aircraft Production in November 1941. Here he saw out the war, eventually rising to become the Ministry's Director of Programmes.³

After the war, Cairncross served as an adviser to the British team negotiating German reparations in Berlin during the winter of 1945–46.⁴ He then moved on to become an economic adviser to the Board of Trade, and then to the Organisation for European Economic Co-Operation in Paris until the end of 1950.⁵ Following a move back to Glasgow University, Cairncross then chaired the Scottish Council's inquiry into regional policy in the early 1950s, recommending a 'growth point' approach to regional development. This recommended that governments turn away from subsidising unemployment 'black spots' and instead provide more help to nearby areas of strong growth: in this respect the report was a humane and innovative plea for a dynamic but also more socially informed policy that would build up towns and cities capable of attracting businesses and workers. 'The community

must have something more to offer than unemployed workers,' the commissioners concluded: 'it must have the facilities and the atmosphere that will let transplanted enterprise take firm root'.⁶

This idea was expensive, however, as well as politically inconvenient for Conservative ministers keen not to be seen undermining the economies of rural Scottish regions distant from the Central Belt or to attack areas reliant on isolated clusters of manufacturing industry.⁷ Officials also noted that areas especially favoured under the 'black spots' approach would meet the report with hostility.⁸ It only became official policy a decade later, partly due to a further Scottish Council report of 1961 that backed up Cairncross' approach.⁹ Cairncross himself then opposed ministers' attempts to retreat from their new 'growth point' policy, and help isolated pockets of very high unemployment, as a 'disservice' to those regions.¹⁰ A number of other projects preoccupied him during the early 1950s: he worked, for instance, on the committee overseeing the National Institute of Economic and Social Research's inquiry into British official statistics.¹¹

Cairncross also served on the Radcliffe Committee on the Workings of the Monetary System between 1957 and 1959, and signed the final report that played down the role of monetary policy in economic management.¹² He was ready to be persuaded that interest rates, mediated as they were through the banks, might have less impact on the economy than previously thought. Budgetary and other direct policies to affect liquidity – such as hire purchase or credit controls – might have to play a larger role than before.¹³ His views fitted well in this respect – at least in theory – with those of Robert Hall, his immediate predecessor.¹⁴ Indeed, the first edition of Cairncross' classic 1944 textbook, *Introduction to Economics*, contained a number of rather radical summaries of more-or-less 'Keynesian' doctrine. Cairncross had known Keynes during his Cambridge graduate studies in the 1930s, and here adapted and helped explain the great economist's ideas about investment, the National Debt and full employment.¹⁵ He was no unreconstructed neo-classicist, as his later opposition to the cruder forms of Thatcherite monetarism demonstrate.¹⁶ But Cairncross also remained very sceptical as to some of the more radical and abstract 'Cambridge' or 'new Keynesian' ideas circulating in British economics at this time, mainly but not exclusively associated with the growth theories of Joan Robinson and Nicholas Kaldor.¹⁷ He defined himself against theoretical and political extremes in other ways. He was also notably agnostic, for instance, as to the efficacy of the so-called 'Phillips curve' trade-off between unemployment and inflation, which both monetarist right and New Keynesian left denounced as simplistic and mechanistic. Though he was not prepared to dismiss the idea out of hand, he did agree that its implications for policy had to be managed with 'caution' and judgement.¹⁸

Cairncross was a more immediately imposing though more volatile figure than Hall: Macmillan wrote privately that he was possessed of a 'fine brain and a noble Doric accent'.¹⁹ But the real reason Cairncross was chosen – after

talks between Hall, Lord Robbins and Sir Frank Lee, was that 'he would bring to the Treasury ... the great virtues of common sense, a realization of what is and what is not possible in political terms ... He has not been closely identified with any political views or particular economics doctrines ... it might be said of him that he is probably "left of centre", but even that may be too definite a description.'²⁰ Centrist, experienced, well connected, with wide interests in statistical reform and regional policy rather than just macro-economics, Cairncross appeared to fit the bill for a new Chief Economic Adviser very well. The financial journalist Samuel Brittan was told that both Cairncross and Hall were 'pretty middle of the road-Establishment economists'.²¹ That said, the press covered his appointment with some enthusiasm: *The Scotsman* thought he was 'going to look ahead, to have a broad look at the general trends of the economy, and take [the] initiative, which would counter problems which might develop'. Other papers thought he would take 'an entirely fresh approach to ... stimulating exports', and attack 'tight-fisted money measures'.²²

Even more ambitious hopes were ubiquitous at the time: economists, blending together the skills of the administrator and the specialist, were to become one of the foremost professions dedicated 'to the management of uncertainty'.²³ This was a period during which many economists were very hopeful as to the material advances their advice might secure. Walt Rostow's *Stages of Economic Growth*, published in 1960, posited that 'to the degree that consumer sovereignty is respected ... we will see similar ... inelasticities of demand and ... similar patterns of structural evolution in different societies as they go through [to] the high-consumption phase'.²⁴ In other words, the global post-war economic boom might go on forever. In the British context, Labour economists such as Thomas Balogh were lambasting the civil service for being 'generalists' and 'amateurs', possessed only of 'the crossword-puzzle mind, reared on mathematics at Cambridge or Greats at Oxford'. He called for measures 'to strengthen *expert knowledge in the policy-making machine*', and 'remedy the desperate shortage of economic and statistical know-how'. Only this would help governments to reform Britain's economy.²⁵ The employment of more experts in government, including economists, was a key part of Harold Wilson's rhetoric leading up to the General Election of 1964.²⁶

Such was the intellectual environment at the moment Cairncross was appointed. He himself was not entirely immune to these beliefs, telling the Institute of Public Administration in 1967 that the era of limited and episodic Parliamentary investigation and Royal Commissions had been ended by the inception of the welfare state and the managed economy. Continuous economic analysis would now have to take their place. 'The business of Government has become much more extensive, more complex, and hence more in need of specialist advice,' he argued. In an age of technocratic management, 'the administrative machine ... has now

more in common with a large-scale business organization' than it did with nineteenth-century Whitehall. The need for more economic intelligence, forecasting, research and policy advice was pressing.²⁷ These were, it is true, far less ambitious claims than those made by some journalists and politicians; but their normative and positivist overtones would eventually come under scrutiny themselves. This chapter will follow Cairncross' experiences in government as he laboured to give effect to these techniques, and the hopes and ambitions that clustered around them – as well as his growing disillusion with the entire experience.

Cairncross' role under the Conservatives, 1961–64

Cairncross was not to have an easy induction into his new job. The very first question Chancellor Selwyn Lloyd asked of him that June was how to 'solve' the balance of payments problem. Cairncross found him 'an expansionist with his eye fixed on the domestic situation, puzzled and disappointed by the failure of production to increase, but with no particular anxiety about the pound'. He initially had 'a lot of sympathy' with this line of argument, until he began to talk to other advisers and look at the figures. This plainly showed that the UK was heading straight for a serious balance of payments crisis.²⁸ Cairncross eventually submitted a paper to the Budget Committee, drafted by Bryan Hopkin, whom he had known at Cambridge in the 1930s, that made clear that the difficulties would persist without at least a £300m (and preferably a £600m) reduction in domestic demand.²⁹ The Chancellor was disinclined to listen, citing the high level of Britain's reserves at that point – though the sterling crisis which blew up within days changed ministers' minds.³⁰ It took a \$2bn standby credit from the IMF, and a large rise in Bank Rate, to settle the markets' nerves. By this time Cairncross believed that the sum of slightly over £300m taken out of the economy by the Chancellor's July mini-Budget – the infamous 'July measures' – was inadequate. Even £700m might not meet the case, he minuted.³¹ The expansionary path was, even so, supposed to resume during 1962. The situation was now a little more promising than in 1960–61 – for one thing, the rest of the sterling area was not running so large a deficit with the outside world, meaning they were less likely to draw down their own balances in London. Events had conspired to overtake Cairncross' gloomy recommendations from the previous year. By early 1962, he was content again with the idea of renewed expansion, as world export markets were running strongly ahead and creating a 'heaven sent opportunity to secure a great, and we would hope, continuing improvement in the balance of payments'.³²

The slowdown in 1962 proved more extreme than hoped, at least according to the data available at the time.³³ Cairncross in fact advocated more tax cuts than Maudling was prepared to implement, and proposed a new stimulus to fight unemployment when the numbers out of work jumped

in the autumn.³⁴ Even so, it was during this period that Cairncross had to fight a running battle against Macmillan's unofficial adviser, who had incidentally been the external examiner for Cairncross' Cambridge PhD: Sir Roy Harrod pressed his expansionist and protectionist views on the Prime Minister in a long series of letters, most of which Cairncross thought misguided.³⁵ During 1963 and 1964 the parallels with the previous cycle then became uncomfortable once again, especially as the increase in exports that had helped them get through 1963 was now levelling off.³⁶ Fixed investment was still surging ahead; the Index of Industrial Production had increased by 2 per cent in only five months; overtime was at a record high.³⁷ Only the fact that world growth might slacken in 1965, particularly after an American election and a planned slow-down in public investment, gave Cairncross any hope that home demand might lessen a little and allow the new Chancellor's gamble to work. Even that assumption would see annual GDP growth only slow to 4 per cent, above what Cairncross still regarded as the long-term potential of the economy.³⁸

As Maudling drove home his 'dash for growth', Cairncross began to warn that the lessons of the 1958–59 reflation ('the outcome of a series of measures may exceed the total expected outcome of each of them individually') were being forgotten.³⁹ Britain would end up back in a balance of payments and then an exchange crisis akin to 1961 if the policy were continued – a significant conclusion, for it also signalled a relative adjustment on Cairncross' part of the Radcliffe Committee's arguments. He began to urge at least some tightening of monetary, rather than budgetary, policy, to act on the capital account rather than current spending. This might help right the balance of payments – and please the IMF – without a precipitous rise in unemployment.⁴⁰ But Maudling drew on his advice much less than had Selwyn Lloyd. Cairncross reported having 'seen very little of him' in January 1963, and had to read about that month's cut in Bank Rate in the newspapers.⁴¹ By 1964 he was again urging restrictive budgetary measures on the same lines as he had advised in 1961, since the economy again seemed to be expanding too quickly.⁴²

The Conservatives' conversion to at least some planning measures during 1961–63 also caused him deep foreboding. The work of the National Economic Development Office (NEDO), in particular, often replicated research being done already in the Treasury. 'The more freely NEDO ranges over the field', he wrote in October 1963, 'the more apparent it is that all of this work might just as well go on inside the Treasury – and, indeed ... much of it does.'⁴³ Donald MacDougall, the Office's Director, irked Cairncross during 1963 and 1964 by asking constant 'questions ... directed towards establishing that a more favourable construction could be put on the figures than was favoured by the Economic Section'. He also ignored work on economic forecasting being done, partly at Cairncross' instigation, by Wynn Godley in the Treasury.⁴⁴

Cairncross was convinced of the need for consultations on the long-term role of investment and the economy, industrial re-equipment and on training – all elements of a secure and long-lasting industrial peace, apart from anything else.⁴⁵ He was content that ‘Government and private industry ... take a long look forwards together in order to see what obstacles may arise in the future’. But he knew that the short-term hopes invested in ‘planning’ were unrealistic. The idea of appointing industrial experts and managers to the new National Economic Development Office was no panacea. As he told Frank Lee in August 1961, they would need those “‘economic technocrats” referred to by *The Economist*. These would be difficult to recruit, if indeed they really do exist.’ He advised members of the TUC that their demands for up to 6 per cent growth a year through ‘moving along at a fast pace’ might ‘encourage dangerous illusions and [only attempt to] evade all the dilemmas that arise from rising costs and prices’.⁴⁶

The Chief Economic Adviser was also forced rapidly to adjust to the government’s conversion to a formal wages policy during 1961 and 1962. He was asked to act as the Treasury’s unofficial ‘contact’ with the TUC’s General Secretary, George Woodcock. In this role Cairncross reassured Woodcock, who wanted to see dividends and profits restraint considered alongside limits on wages, ‘that the whole issue of an equitable distribution of incomes’ would inevitably come up under ‘planning’: ‘and that this would inevitably involve a discussion of taxation’.⁴⁷ He reported back to the Treasury on a series of occasions that the TUC were insisting that profits and prices were included in all National Economic Development Council (NEDC) discussions of incomes policy.⁴⁸ He also drew up possible lines of a policy for a new ‘price investigating authority’ to look into ‘profiteering’ early in 1964.⁴⁹

Cairncross was himself in favour of a more established and clearly defined incomes policy linked to trends in productivity, perhaps concentrating on a series of large ‘synchronised’ deals early in the year which would set the pattern for the rest of industry.⁵⁰ This was, to his mind, a calm and ordered policy that was more likely to settle in the public mind than the government’s ‘guiding light’ – an idea that was transparently designed to hold back overall demand and defend sterling.⁵¹ But he found that his trade union contacts became less and less amenable to the very idea of income restraint as the government’s pay pause and ‘guiding light’ wore on.⁵² His own staff also began to make clear to him that the tighter the wage limit, the more ‘wage drift’ was likely to take hold via overtime, promotions and bonuses. Formal wage policies might therefore have less effect on productivity and competitiveness than formal wage rates might suggest.⁵³

Increased labour mobility might stand in for tougher wage policies or higher unemployment, since there would be more reallocation of scarce manpower. It was the fact that Britain was at ‘the limit of our manpower’ that Cairncross suspected raised wages, lowered productivity and ‘meant that the market as a whole is not likely to expand rapidly’.⁵⁴ He suggested

legislation to enforce severance payments for all workers who had been in their post for more than a year.⁵⁵ At a lunch with Sir Laurence Helsby, the Ministry of Labour's Permanent Secretary, he 'suggested that the economy could be operated under greater pressure without ill effects if labour mobility were increased'. Ministry of Labour officials were deeply unimpressed, minuting that 'it's no good talking vaguely about growth industries and contracting industries because maybe some growing industries ought not to be ... and perhaps some industries or services are contracting when they shouldn't'.⁵⁶ In short, helping workers to move between jobs would not *necessarily* raise productivity if the pressure of demand remained high enough: staff could simply move from one poorly performing company to another. The Ministry of Labour were much more concerned to attack inefficiencies *within* the firm, and deeply resented Treasury 'interference'. That department's officials were advising companies to plan their manpower needs – and redeployment – more effectively in order to encourage workers to co-operate with technological change: encouraging talk of more severance pay might be counter-productive. The Ministry was able to stifle Cairncross' plan, and no action was taken until Labour legislated on severance pay in 1965.⁵⁷

These 'grand bargains' between employers, employees and government having failed, Labour would have to recast incomes policy as part of its more general national planning effort.⁵⁸ George Brown, the unpredictable and mercurial head of Labour's new Department of Economic Affairs, would take up the reins: this left little room for Cairncross to consult, or even to advise. He was forced to look on from the Treasury as Brown tried to reach and sustain a package deal by sheer force of personality.⁵⁹ By 1965 he was telling Callaghan that ever-rising wage claims were 'not likely to come from the Trade Unions so much as from the men themselves ... in the present state of the labour market ... [it would therefore] be a mistake to set too much store at this stage by the National Board for Prices and Incomes'.⁶⁰ The 1966 pay freeze and statutory 'standstill', he believed, contained 'a very strong element of make-believe'.⁶¹ By this point incomes policy had been transformed into a blank 'stop' on wages and prices; exactly what he had tried to avoid, and liable to undermine confidence every time each pay norm was breached.⁶² It was to be only one blow among many.

Cairncross' role under Labour: controls, divisions and devaluation, 1964–69

Cairncross' relationship with the incoming Labour administration started badly, and never threatened to develop the closeness he had enjoyed with Selwyn Lloyd, or even his working relations with Maudling. There was even some early talk of sacking him and introducing an American-style 'spoils system' whereby each new government brought in its own advisers.⁶³ Cairncross agreed with most other civil servants that devaluation would be

foolish and inflationary without harsh economic measures that ministers would never consider – not, at least, without first being shown the error of their free-spending ways.⁶⁴ In this he paradoxically sided with Labour ministers, who feared the political opprobrium of a Labour devaluation after their previous retreat in 1949, and spoke against the majority of their new ‘outside’ experts: particularly Kaldor, Robert Neild and Donald MacDougall, the Department of Economic Affairs’ (DEA) new Director-General.⁶⁵

Cairncross could certainly not have been accused of hiding his true opinions from ministers. Treasury officials had, as Callaghan accepted, worked on detailed spending plans ‘in the spirit’ of Labour’s manifesto, particularly on pensions and defence.⁶⁶ But documents prepared during the General Election campaign made clear that the macroeconomic situation was deeply unsettling. The Maudling boom had rested on twin assumptions that supported the case that exports would keep on rising. World trade was booming; and politicians had asserted (‘never, so far as I can remember, supported by officials’) that faster expansion would build up industrial capacity. ‘It is hardly too much to say’, ran the brief for Callaghan in October, ‘that over the past six months the bottom has been completely knocked out of both lines of argument.’ British exports were now sagging; ‘and why should we make an inevitable deficit still higher by refraining from deflationary measures which, in one form or another, we shall eventually have to take?’⁶⁷ He advised increases in interest rates, cuts to the housing programme, tax increases and cuts in subsidies – all on a wider scale than other officials, for instance Armstrong, were willing to advocate.⁶⁸ This was advice that incoming Labour ministers certainly did not want to hear, and it undeniably damaged Cairncross’ standing with them.

Cairncross also fell out with the new Chancellor just days after Labour’s election victory, protesting that Neild was being promoted over his head to be Economic Adviser to the Treasury, not to the Chancellor (which latter title Cairncross felt was more appropriate). Cairncross also lost his title of ‘Chief Economic Adviser to Her Majesty’s Government’, becoming instead head of the newly titled Government Economic Service.⁶⁹ ‘Utter chaos reigned’ for the few days it took to decide on Cairncross’ new title and role as the Head of the Economic Section and the overall manager of economists in government service: he felt that he ‘had in effect been sacked’, and ‘was tempted to resign’.⁷⁰ Worse was in fact to follow, for it was during the long struggle for sterling’s dollar peg that Cairncross felt his isolation and powerlessness most keenly. As he later reflected, ‘for days, weeks, even months, an economic adviser may hardly set eyes on his minister: and when he does, it is likely to be in a meeting of some size, along with several other officials’.⁷¹

None of the senior politicians was willing to consider the main option that Cairncross repeatedly put to them: a measure of deflation to ‘make room’ for the reallocation of resources to exports.⁷² It was not that the relatively austere Scots adviser revelled in the idea of more unemployment: in fact,

he regarded any judgement between devaluation and deflation as a 'cruel choice', which might eventually be forced on governments if ever competitors', primarily Europeans', cost-price inflation dipped below Britain's. It was simply that he believed that one or other of those choices would have to be faced eventually.⁷³ Callaghan was the most economically orthodox of the triumvirate at the heart of the government, and the most susceptible to economists' advice and pressure from the Bank of England as UK costs and prices rose throughout 1965 and 1966. He forwarded Cairncross' advice to Wilson a number of times, prefacing one report from Cairncross with an acceptance that 'his analysis is pretty well right'.⁷⁴ But even Callaghan turned down the majority of tax rises either suggested, or supported, by Cairncross.⁷⁵ The latter secretly believed that devaluation was 'increasingly likely' as early as January 1965.⁷⁶ Treasury civil servants, though officially banned from talking about devaluation, began to make preparations for that eventuality if it were indeed to occur. In March 1965, they began to meet in the inelegantly and comically titled 'FU' committee – the acronym standing for 'Forever Unmentionable', a committee which critically did *not* include Balogh or Kaldor.⁷⁷

Instead of devaluing or deflating, ministers adopted a series of 'stop-gap' policies, starting with an import surcharge of 15 per cent in November 1964, and continuing with other administrative measures such as tighter exchange controls. Cairncross was enormously unimpressed at these tactics – in this, at least, chiming in with the general opinion in Whitehall.⁷⁸ The controversy this caused, in particular among European Free Trade Area countries whose goods were supposed to enter the UK on special terms, was extreme. Ministers 'ought to have known what a furore it would cause abroad', Cairncross concluded.⁷⁹ The search continued, meanwhile, for a more consistent and long-term solution to the balance of payments deficit – and discussions eventually clustered around schemes known as 'Plan D' to 'Plan G'. All these ideas ultimately involved tax changes, subsidies or grants that subsidised exports. Plan E, for instance, involved replacing investment tax allowances with grants, quicker to deliver and slanted towards manufacturing industry – a measure that the International Monetary Fund and international legal commitments to freer trade would probably allow.⁸⁰ Some of these changes might be of some assistance: investment grants, Cairncross accepted, might 'help to keep up investment while lowering demand'.⁸¹ But none of them could meet the immediate need to reassure the markets that the UK was really serious about defending sterling.

Cairncross remained just as unconvinced of the case for faster growth and a 'breakthrough' to higher productivity as he had when the NEDC had been created. Expansionists such as MacDougall in the DEA believed that Britain was being held back by a lack of industrial capacity from the years of 'stop-go'; Cairncross questioned whether there was any evidence for this assertion.⁸² He was sceptical about the whole idea of a 'Department for

Economic Affairs' while Labour were still in Opposition, telling Armstrong that the Opposition 'completely underestimate ... the extent to which the Treasury is already involved in economic planning'. He was quite willing to concede that there was 'something in the idea that there is need for the concentration of responsibility for industrial policy in a single department': but the Treasury should still retain responsibility for 'economic co-ordination ... another word for planning, although most people do not recognise it'.⁸³ He advised Anthony Crosland, earmarked to be a junior minister in the new department, against the idea.⁸⁴

Cairncross only conceded that work on the National Plan should go ahead, ending in a White Paper, because he feared the effect on confidence of cancelling an exercise ministers had already advertised.⁸⁵ He had thought that the DEA would focus on long-term work, but in fact they were working on short- to medium-term issues and causing 'waste and duplication' as they overlapped and clashed with Treasury work. Its work seemed to be 'not so much a plan as a projection; a kind of elaborate LREA [Long-Range Economic Assessment] dominated by the need for statistical consistency rather than by ideas for improving the structure of the whole economy'.⁸⁶ He thought that the whole edifice was uncomfortably alike to the confusion that reigned in Whitehall while Hugh Dalton was Chancellor, and Stafford Cripps Minister for Economic Affairs, in 1947. 'They had forgotten,' he recalled in the 1990s: 'they assembled people who knew nothing about planning ... It was just a jumble. It changed after 1968; indeed, even 1968 wasn't so bad, but 1964–67 was just a muddle. Terrible business.'⁸⁷ He was hardly alone in this view. Many of his fellow economists in government service were similarly disillusioned by their involvement in preparing the National Plan, including the Oxford economist Wilfred Beckerman, who was in charge of the 'Very Long Term' parts of the Plan.⁸⁸ He was probably less disillusioned than the specifically partisan special advisers, for he had possessed no very high hopes to start with: but this probably allowed him to be more biting critical.

Meanwhile, Cairncross seemed to move ever further from offering advice on the central economic questions of the day. The sterling crisis of July 1965 had caused the 'four economists' – Neild, Balogh, Kaldor and MacDougall – to write to Wilson calling for devaluation. The Prime Minister rejected this option out of hand.⁸⁹ For Cairncross, the fact that he had not been consulted at all, and indeed none of his fellow economists had 'breathed a word' of this to him before sending their note, demonstrated that he was seen in the other and 'deflationary' Treasury camp. Meanwhile, the Economic Advisers' own collective meetings, quite separate from those of 'FU', were increasingly marred by debates over whether devaluation should mean the defence of a new fixed rate, or (as Kaldor advocated) floating the currency altogether.⁹⁰

The government's advisers admitted their lack of a 'common view' on macroeconomic strategy in a long memorandum to the relevant Cabinet

Committee in January 1966, an admission that exposed deep-seated theoretical differences between those now committed to devaluation, more planning and controls, or deflation.⁹¹ Balogh in particular became something of a *bête noire* for Cairncross.⁹² Rumours abounded that Balogh had tried to get Cairncross 'exiled' to Washington as Britain's representative to the IMF or World Bank. According to MacDougall, he 'really had his knife' into the Scot – though Wilson himself made sure that Cairncross stayed where he was.⁹³ Even so, Balogh continued to irritate Cairncross until he left No. 10 in 1968. He would sit silent in meetings while gathering intelligence on officials' proposals, and then attack them in long personal memoranda to ministers.⁹⁴ Kaldor was rightly perceived as a 'real' expert on tax affairs. Always ready to propose specific remedies using the taxation system, he had spent decades building up his experience of tax reform, for instance on the Royal Commission on the Taxation of Profits and Income between 1951 and 1955.⁹⁵ Cairncross saw him in a much more favourable light than his fellow Hungarian – though he often despaired of Kaldor's ability to work with his colleagues.⁹⁶ He was sceptical about Kaldor's advocacy of the 'Verdoorn Law', which posited that rises in industrial output as against services would raise productivity.⁹⁷ He was very anxious about the selective employment tax of 1966, which taxed services more heavily than manufacturing industry in order to boost output and exports.⁹⁸ Even so, proceeding via the tax system seemed more appealing – and more academically rigorous – than Balogh's constant appeal to administrative 'action'.⁹⁹ As 1965 went on, Kaldor also moved towards Cairncross' view that at least some more deflation was required. Sterling's medium-term position became obviously more perilous, but ministers continued to discuss only administrative solutions to the balance of payments problem. These developments had all made their impression on at least one of 'the Hungarians'.¹⁰⁰

Balogh, on the other hand, was given to reading Cairncross' advice, and then undermining it with covering notes inserted in ministers' Red Boxes. He also loudly denounced many of Cairncross' friends and recommendations for advisory posts or committee memberships – including Devons.¹⁰¹ Though Cairncross rejected other civil servants' view that Balogh was a 'charlatan', and actually admired some of his policy work, he grew increasingly frustrated with Balogh's wide-ranging and free-floating role as Labour's economic *éminence grise*.¹⁰² When Cairncross recommended at least considering devaluation or interest rate rises and spending cuts in the summer of 1965, Balogh played on the Prime Minister's own prejudices when he countered that this whole approach 'was conceived on the basis of a fallacy ... the true alternative – to both deflation and devaluation ... is the taking of discriminating action'.¹⁰³ Balogh much preferred the expansionist, and more 'planning-minded', advice of Neild and MacDougall.¹⁰⁴ The two rival advisers had several heated discussions in both official meetings and more relaxed gatherings. Cairncross' ever more entrenched scepticism

about 'indicative planning' saw him lambast Balogh's espousal of the Italian and French growth experiments to his face on a number of occasions during 1965. 'What rot!' he wrote in his diary after yet another row with Balogh.¹⁰⁵

The Prime Minister's own assumed expertise in these matters, having served during wartime as a statistician for both William Beveridge and the Board of Trade, was a further hindrance. Encouraged by Balogh, he constantly put forward what he thought of as 'physical' and 'control' measures – mostly rooted in microeconomics, and taking effect only in the medium term at best – to plug the gap in the balance of payments. The long list of 'solutions' Wilson sent round Whitehall following the November 1964 crisis particularly irked Cairncross.¹⁰⁶ It demonstrated, he wrote privately, 'that preference for administrative gimmicks that Harold used to show at the Board of Trade'. 'Where a straight economic analysis is needed', Cairncross noted, 'he [Wilson] goes for computer control of stocks, a Post Office unit trust, and a pig's breakfast of other irrelevancies.' During a frustrating buffet supper at No. 10 late in that same year he had to sit through the Prime Minister's espousal of ideas Cairncross dismissed as 'half-baked ... hobby-horses'.¹⁰⁷

Ministers were eventually faced, in any case, with the necessity of some deflationary measures in the summer of 1966 – the so-called 'July measures'. Cairncross himself later felt that this might have been the moment to devalue, since a margin of safety had been secured given unemployment's subsequent rise to 2 per cent of the labour force: the gains of devaluation would not then have been eaten up by yet another burst of consumer spending.¹⁰⁸ That said, the balance of payments situation did thereafter improve into 1967, as the pressure of demand lessened and imports fell off slightly. It was just possible to envisage a balance of payments surplus by 1968 – though Cairncross warned that even this outcome was shrouded in 'very large uncertainties affecting both the current and capital balance'.¹⁰⁹ A combination of poorly timed government action and bad luck prevented this development. Ministers insisted on a gentle reflation in the spring and summer of 1967, for example relaxing hire purchase controls while raising family allowances.¹¹⁰ At the same time, Wilson's application for EEC membership, and then dock strikes, the Arab–Israeli War of that year and higher oil prices, made the external situation worse.¹¹¹

Cairncross, however, always insisted that the spring reflation was the key moment at which sterling's parity became untenable.¹¹² He gave up that fight only at the last possible moment. As late as August he was telling Heller: 'don't give up on the pound yet. It's not teetering on the brink. Trade is better than the world thinks ... And there's no reason to believe that Wilson has given up on the pound. He could be forced off, but I don't believe he will.'¹¹³ But by early November 1967 even he was putting it to Callaghan and Wilson that, given their short-term debts, devaluation was the only option

they had left. He sent a personal note to this effect – in his ‘spidery and difficult handwriting’ – to Callaghan on 2 November.¹¹⁴ Cairncross explained to the Chancellor, in a personal meeting next day, that it was now his ‘duty’ to devalue.¹¹⁵ Callaghan and Wilson resisted this advice for a few days, hoping that a pre-election boom in the United States would buoy world trade and save sterling, but to no avail. On 18 November, attempts at constructing another rescue package on anything like acceptable terms having apparently failed, the government was indeed forced to devalue the pound. Hundreds of millions of pounds had been lost propping up the currency’s value since Cairncross had reached his final conclusion back in late October. He later estimated that the government might have saved more than half of the £356m they spent on this last defence of sterling’s dollar parity.¹¹⁶

Once the post-devaluation ‘package’ was announced, at £400m in cuts rather more severe than even Cairncross had believed possible or desirable in ‘FU’ during 1965, the long battle to hold sterling’s new parity lay ahead.¹¹⁷ Some of the government’s economic advisers, particularly Kaldor, were gloomy about holding even the new dollar peg. Kaldor continued to advise floating. He argued in private that British exporters might simply raise their prices to take advantage of devaluation, meaning that their goods were no more competitive than before. Cairncross disagreed, pointing out that individual companies could boost their profits more by harvesting the productivity gains of higher production as unit costs fell. He advised continuing the struggle.¹¹⁸ But this was one of the most difficult periods in post-war economic management, as the balance of payments figures (lagging, as ever, far behind the real situation) refused to come right until late in 1968. At one point Cairncross wrote, in some despair, ‘if this medicine will not work no other medicine will ... we cannot be sure that further reinforcement of existing policies may not yet be called for ... [but] we have certainly nothing in hand’.¹¹⁹

Even so, during the general gold crisis of March 1968, with Britain’s foreign exchange holdings at a post-war low and virtually no contingency planning available, Cairncross sat on the official committee that decided once more to defend sterling’s fixed parity. If the crisis had not been defused, this defence would have included – to the Bank of England’s distress – entirely blocking sterling holders’ access to their money.¹²⁰ In the end a two-tier gold system was adopted, with Central Banks prepared to sell gold to each other at lower than market rates. But the economic advisers told the Prime Minister that this system could only be a temporary measure, and prophesied a general increase in the price of gold – exactly what did, indeed, happen in 1971.¹²¹ For now, though, confidence in sterling required yet more support, and it was not until spring 1969 that confidence returned and a further devaluation or float was ruled out.¹²² The Treasury judged further spending restraint to be essential in this fight, and Cairncross at this point carried on his long campaign against Kaldor’s Investment Grants.¹²³ A Treasury official review

was launched into these payments during 1968, and Cairncross made clear that he 'believed the system could result in a transfer of resources from efficient non-capital intensive firms, who benefitted little from investment grants, to less efficient capital-intensive industries such as steel'.¹²⁴ The payments nevertheless remained, though they were reduced from their peak of 25 per cent of outlays back to 20 per cent at the start of 1969.¹²⁵

There was even a sense during these years that the Economic Advisers were asked to work on apparently 'subsidiary' issues, such as fisheries, to prevent them making 'mischief' over the exchange rate.¹²⁶ One example of this came in the guise of Cairncross' role as an adviser on housing policy – a key element in the British economy's 'overheating' in these years, as Labour pressed for half a million starts a year, but also at one remove from national monetary and exchange rate policy. Cairncross had begun worrying about this overheating part of the economy while the Conservatives were still in power, while the target was still down at 350,000 housing starts a year.¹²⁷

It was little wonder that Cairncross returned to academic life in 1969 – as Master of St Peter's College, Oxford – wondering what he might have done differently.¹²⁸ But he certainly did not retire. He still had a long career ahead of him, firstly as a head of house in Oxford, but also as the author or co-author of many books, including two of the key volumes about post-war British economic policy. Both of them, sometimes specifically but usually obliquely, covered his own years at the heart of government. *Years of Recovery*, published in 1985, analysed the Attlee government's economic policy, and *'Goodbye Great Britain'*, with Kathleen Burk, covered the IMF crisis of 1976, though the book began with a survey of sterling's post-war fall from grace.¹²⁹ Both were sharpened by what Austin Robinson called 'the immense advantage and authority of inside knowledge'. These attributes caused many observers – and Cairncross himself – to conclude that his years in government had allowed him to begin a third and fascinating part of his career, gradually becoming one of the foremost economic historians writing about Britain in the twentieth century.¹³⁰

The incapacities and limits of British technical advice

Policy-making in these years was bedevilled by a shortage of skilled manpower within Whitehall, a failing with which Cairncross was only too familiar. Project after project met with the same barrier. The number of economists serving in Whitehall at this time would come to seem very low indeed. Only 18 were listed in that category in 1963 – though that list would run to 25 if agricultural economists in the Ministry of Agriculture were included.¹³¹ At that point Cairncross felt 'besieged by other Departments seeking to acquire members of the Economic Section for one purpose or another'.¹³² It fell to him, even so, to manage this new drive towards 'efficiency' and 'professionalisation', especially after the Treasury reorganisation of 1962 that

gave his Economic Section the lead role in integrating professional economists into Whitehall.¹³³ He was one of the key advocates of a Treasury Centre for Administrative Studies, which opened in 1963 and provided Assistant Principals with a 20-week course including the study of economics, statistics and management science.¹³⁴ Insiders thought that Cairncross was most effective recruiting and retaining staff by raising morale, but it was still a continual struggle to recruit and retain expert economists.¹³⁵

The strain was particularly acute in the first two years of the Labour government, as the different economics departments jostled for position and 'very heavy strain' was placed on all government economists.¹³⁶ At one particular Treasury meeting on public spending Cairncross wrote in his diary that 'Otto' Clarke 'kept asking Donald [MacDougall] if he "had a man" to do this or that when the one thing D[onald] is itching to do is to recruit more men to do research on items of public expenditure'.¹³⁷ But the difficulty was a long-running sore, not limited to these years of particular tension. It fell to Cairncross to recruit what experts there were at the time, often on an *ad hoc* basis. He asked Henry Phelps Brown, an expert on labour relations from the London School of Economics, for statistical help on wage policy ('bedevilled by the need to make do with the wrong figures') throughout 1961 and 1962.¹³⁸ During 1962, for instance, he managed to convince Alan Holmans from the University of Glasgow to help the Treasury with a 'Very Long Term Planning' exercise looking ahead to the 1980s.¹³⁹ Cairncross also consulted Federation of British Industries and British Employers' Confederation statistics alongside official data, though he abandoned wider plans to pool information with both the employers and the TUC as potentially embarrassing and prejudicial to the making of policy.¹⁴⁰

The specialist departments – the Ministry of Technology and the Board of Trade in particular – lacked adequate economic staffing throughout Cairncross' time in government, partly because the recruitment of economists at the 'centre', inside the Treasury and the Cabinet Office, choked off potential sources of able experts.¹⁴¹ When the Ministry of Education asked whether they might appoint an economist in the summer of 1964, Cairncross replied that 'there are already several other Departments that are anxious to recruit an Economist ... And for whom I have not yet succeeded in finding a suitable man.'¹⁴² Cairncross despaired of recruiting enough experts to do the work that was required to support even day-to-day economic policy. When the Labour MP and science policy expert Jeremy Bray called in *The Guardian* for regional statistical offices, Cairncross advised that this was 'highly unrealistic': 'he seriously understates the present number of vacancies', Cairncross wrote.¹⁴³

After the creation of the DEA, Cairncross sought to boost Treasury numbers from 17 economists to 25, strengthening the thinly staffed Public Sector Group and Finance Group in particular. He was, even so, unable to make his writ run throughout Whitehall: the new DEA and Ministry of

Overseas Development, in particular, simply made their own arrangements. Several experts from the University of Glasgow were seconded to the DEA before Cairncross could speak to them.¹⁴⁴ He found it ‘a little trying when the very Economists that I have marked down in my mind for invitations to join the Economic Section ... should already have been approached and be on the point of signing up’. The Ministry of Overseas Development also paid their economists more than other departments, which made it impossible for Cairncross to attract able practitioners.¹⁴⁵ Even academic jobs would pay his junior colleagues more than they could earn in the civil service.¹⁴⁶ Cairncross’ successes were, even so, just as notable as the continual pressure on him to bring in ‘outsiders’. By 1964 there were 46 economists advising the UK government, and by 1970 that number had risen more than fourfold to 209.¹⁴⁷

Official statistics remained, throughout the 1960s, slow to emerge, confusing and subject to constant revision. Cairncross was peculiarly sensitive to the need for better data: his own Cambridge PhD on home and foreign investment, later published in 1953, had unearthed and depended on large amounts of new data.¹⁴⁸ Cairncross now constantly pointed out contemporary statistical ‘deficiencies’, for instance during 1962, when the external balance was ‘something of a mystery’, and in his May 1966 report on the housing industry.¹⁴⁹ Later in the year, he recommended gathering much more data from nationalised industries to work out what public sector investment could be afforded – part of a more general attempt to think about ‘long-term planning of public expenditure’ that might allow the forecasting and qualitative parts of the National Plan to survive.¹⁵⁰ Work on ‘the economic implications of public expenditure’ eventually began in the spring of 1967 – conducted by Godley and his fellow Cambridge economist Kenneth Berrill, among others.¹⁵¹ But Cairncross insisted that this research remained ‘novel and highly complex. Economists have only begun to grapple systematically with the intellectual issues involved.’ It was unlikely to present ministers with solutions to their dilemmas in the near term.¹⁵²

Cairncross imagined a process of statistical reform – a key aim of Labour in power – that would be managed by ‘the principal users of statistics ... and a small staff that can pursue the issues raised’. In other words, an official team drawn from the Treasury and other economic departments would map out what they now needed from official data.¹⁵³ Unfortunately for this design, both Balogh and Wilson were keenly interested in this subject themselves. Balogh countered that the problem was the speed of data assembly and publication, rather than the type of data gathered, and suggested a series of what Cairncross termed ‘highly unrealistic’ and ‘not very accurate’ targets for the faster assembly of existing data series. He told Armstrong that ‘we can’t overlook the existing shortage of men and machines’; far better to look quantitatively at what civil servants actually wanted from the numbers.¹⁵⁴ Cairncross responded to Cabinet Office pressure for the faster compilation

of statistics more directly, angrily countering that Treasury advisers were 'only too well aware ... of the limited possibilities of finding staff in the immediate future to meet additional calls on the statistical services of the Government'.¹⁵⁵ Even so, Wilson appointed an innovative 'mixed' committee of officials and junior ministers to look into the question – a move contrary to Cairncross' call for a more specialist group.¹⁵⁶ He opposed the creation of this new committee from the start, since 'broad political guidance is not of much help without full study of what might be done'.¹⁵⁷

These delays and inconsistencies were one inherent fact of economic life, but they were particularly acute at a time when the government was trying to run the economy at a high rate of demand, while also avoiding devaluation and fine-tuning the economy month-by-month. In early 1966, as both unemployment and the index of production fell at the same time, it was particularly difficult to know whether to advise ministers to hold their nerve or attempt to slow the economy's advance. This sense of uncertainty had already allowed Balogh and Wilson to ignore official advice on the economy. *En route* to Washington with the Prime Minister in May 1965, Cairncross listened to Wilson expound again on the benefits of physical controls and tax changes, rather than simple deflation. According to Cairncross, his discourse 'trod the familiar path from gimmicks to autobiography and then hotfoot to the failings of statistics, this government's favourite alibi'.¹⁵⁸

Conclusions: Cairncross, British economic advice and economic scepticism

Cairncross drew a number of fairly clear lessons from his time as an official adviser. He was at this time not, as we have seen, quite so certain as he later became that 'extensive controls ... muffled incentives which were given freer play in some other industrial countries'.¹⁵⁹ He was willing to experiment with new methods and novel theories. But Cairncross became increasingly convinced that economic policy was as much about luck, judgement and political skill as it was about technical expertise – not that he had ever been able to draw on sufficient reserves of the latter anyway. He saw ever more clearly that economic policy was often a form of 'psychological warfare', pushed around by 'bluff [and] rumour', and akin to what Denis Healey later termed 'a branch of social psychology'.¹⁶⁰ His commitment to experimentation and expanding the realm of governments' knowledge had paradoxically taught him how limited both could prove.

He expounded on just this theme in a long private letter to Selwyn Lloyd after that Chancellor's fall in 1962. There he wondered 'whether I may not have been to blame in using what influence I had without regard to the political consequences and whether the courses we urged on you asked more of a democratic government than was wise' – a clear admission that he may have pressed too much deflation on the Chancellor. But he then went even

further, admitting that ‘in economic affairs there is always plenty of room for differences of opinion and that the things we really know as beyond dispute are often outweighed by the things we can only ... guess at. So any economic adviser is ... a bit of a charlatan half the time.’¹⁶¹ Economists did *not* draw on Olympian theories or well-worked-out doctrines when advising politicians; they had to take up immediate and often instinctive positions, for, as Cairncross said, the adviser who insisted too strongly on his neutrality ran the risk of being neutered.¹⁶²

The proper role of advice lay, rather, in guiding the administration, management and stabilisation of the economy via the budget and other ‘real’ alterations to demand. Cairncross remained interested, in short, in reforming Whitehall’s *processes*, and in the constant modification of policy, rather than in securing some fixed end-point when predetermined theories would pay off. ‘It is hardly too much to say’, he wrote in later editions of his textbook, ‘that what really matters in planning is not the periodic preparation of something that can be described as a plan but the continuous practice of forecasting and standing ready to take any necessary measures to secure the major objectives of policy.’¹⁶³ It was the overriding lesson he had drawn from his time in the post-war Board of Trade, and he saw little reason to revise it during the 1960s. ‘The Economic Adviser’, he wrote in 1955, ‘was no secluded oracle or venerable sage ... he was ... an ordinary member of the Department, drawing occasionally on his training ... but far more commonly on experience and contacts built up over a long period.’¹⁶⁴ More generally, as he later put it, he believed that ‘pure theory is concerned with ultimate truths, not with action’.¹⁶⁵ Just as improvements in economic efficiency actually lay in ‘engineering design, experimentation in the factory [and] response[s] to specific pressures’, rather than ‘on some separable activity called R&D’, economic theory should be the servant, rather than the master, of credible policies.¹⁶⁶

Cairncross himself was of course a notable sceptic about what governments could know; in his 1964 Alfred Watson Memorial Lecture, he compared economic forecasting to predicting the weather, and concluded that ‘economic forecasts’ similarly ‘cannot hope to show exactly how the economy will develop’. But at that point even he believed that ‘we know what variables to concentrate on, we have a fair idea of the kind of interactions that take place between them, we have reason to believe that some of the more important functional relationships are comparatively stable, and we have a definite point of view from which to examine what is going on’.¹⁶⁷ Few economists could write even that cautious sentence by the start of the twenty-first century. Even by 1972 Cairncross himself was more gloomily concluding that ‘we do not know for sure how the economy works and ... it certainly does not work in the same way for long’.¹⁶⁸

Since the 1970s, and following two oil shocks and at least four global recessions, there is even more room for doubt.¹⁶⁹ The Keynesian synthesis

on which Cairncross relied has been transformed by a new emphasis on behavioural complexity, non-linear explanations and intricate interrelationships, driven in part by the use of game theory and the adoption of ever more 'chaotic' hypotheses.¹⁷⁰ New and 'alternative' economic indicators, focusing for instance on environmental sustainability, have emerged as much out of these theoretical insights as they have out of contemporary green politics.¹⁷¹ Economics may in part now be seen as a discourse – a mode of communication, or even of 'conversation'.¹⁷² The ranks of 'moderate' macroeconomic administrator-managers such as Cairncross have thinned as economists have shifted their ground to adopt ever more personal, eclectic and politically engaged positions.¹⁷³ But even the strongest iconoclasts have long imagined rebuilding, not destroying, a discipline 'much more closely allied with the imprecise knowledge of political, psychological and anthropological insights', and have called for a more sensitive, multifaceted, even unruly economics which rejects the 'checklist mentality' inherent in theoretical model-building.¹⁷⁴ Cairncross would, almost certainly, have approved of that ambition – another telling attack on the 'supermen' of economics who had promised too much.

8

'An All Over Expansion': The Politics of the Land in 'Golden Age' Britain

The uncertain triumph of land-use planning, 1909–47

The land has always been a controversial issue in British politics. From the radical 'Diggers' who occupied the land during the English Civil War, through the Chartists' 'back to the land' enthusiasms and Land Plan, and on to Liberal land reforms in Ireland, Scotland and Wales, the multiple divides between landowners, tenants and the landless have remained one of the key dividing lines in British society.¹ But the acute twentieth-century debate over government's role in English land reform might be said to date from David Lloyd George's time as Chancellor between 1908 and 1914. His 'People's Budgets' of 1909 and 1910 enacted a land tax that amounted to 20 per cent of the land's increase in value, though agricultural land was exempted. Another, much smaller, charge imposed a tax on 'unimproved' land that was being hoarded.² The yield would be low – perhaps £500,000 in all, at a time when the budget deficit ran at £15.8m – but the symbolism was unmistakable. For the first time, all land would be surveyed by the government, allowing the state to tap this source of national wealth in future: Lloyd George had deliberately raised the standard of what one biographer has called 'class warfare'.³

Labour faced the problem of how to inherit and interpret the Liberals' tradition of radicalism in terms of land policy. Whatever its plans for industry, the Labour Party always remained ambivalent about the idea of land nationalisation. The romantic appeal of the small farmer tilling his own land, whom Keir Hardie believed 'to all intents and purposes [to be] a free man' – and the need to attract rural votes – were too deep-seated to adopt the policy in any strong form. Labour made several strong statements advocating nationalisation, for instance in *The Labour Party and the Countryside* in 1922, and *Labour's Policy for Agriculture* in 1926.⁴ But its proposals were, in detail, less radical. The First World War had shown how government, producers and labourers could work together to boost food production. County Executive Committees made up of landowners, farmers, some local

councillors and local Board of Agriculture representatives had, on the whole, executed central governments' orders with aplomb.⁵

The party's settled policy for the main part therefore looked to 'public ownership', vaguely defined, to co-ordinate agricultural production and land use through local committees made up of farm workers, farmers and nominated members of local authorities – rather on wartime lines. This would ensure that the legitimate interests of both sides of industry, and 'the public' more widely defined, would be met – though all such ideas were easily lampooned by Conservatives as typical Socialist red tape, controls and interference.⁶ Labour statements such as *For Socialism and Peace* (1934) and *Labour's Immediate Programme* (1937) assumed that the state would adopt the right to acquire all land for development purposes, including urban land, at rates it set in advance. Full-blooded nationalisation remained, therefore, an open question. The formula also left untouched the issue of how much land *would* be seized, and how it would be used, an open question. It was also unclear whether Labour wanted to preserve open land around conurbations via town and country planning policies, or to encourage local authorities to compulsorily purchase large areas on the suburban fringe for public housing development.⁷ A Liberal Town Planning Act had already been passed in 1909 with broad bipartisan approval, though it was poorly drafted, and only allowed – not required – local authorities to draw up plans for new housing estates, not whole new areas of urban development.⁸

The Second World War helped to radicalise the entire debate, and two official reports recommended very far-reaching action.⁹ The Report of the Royal Commission on the Distribution of the Industrial Population, under Sir Montague Barlow, recommended regional decentralisation plans for the population and a powerful Central Authority to manage the process, to relieve urban congestion and redevelop the depressed areas.¹⁰ Two other reports – the so-called Scott and Uthwatt Reports into 'Land Utilisation in Rural Areas' and 'Compensation and Betterment' – made even more of a public impression. Lord Justice Scott and his colleagues recommended the creation of a Central Planning Authority with wide powers to protect, and develop the amenity value of, the countryside; Mr Justice Uthwatt and his committee that all development rights should be vested in the state.¹¹ However, Conservative members of the wartime coalition objected to the wide-ranging implications of such 'universal' reform. The Cabinet's Reconstruction Committee was divided ideologically, confused about the detail and undermined by interdepartmental rivalry. The Treasury, in particular, thought that any comprehensive solution might be unaffordable.¹² The subsequent 1944 White Paper and Town and Country Planning Act limited themselves to promising greater compulsory powers for local authorities.¹³ The coalition had a great deal of trouble passing even this compromise in the face of hostile Conservative backbenchers.¹⁴

Development rights, if not the land itself, were effectively nationalised in Labour's 1947 Town and Country Planning Act once the party was in power in its own right. It is important to note, however, that even the 1947 Act collectivised rights over building land under rather different presumptions from Labour's pre-war pamphleteering, and from the Uthwatt recommendations themselves. Doubts about the popularity of nationalising all land, especially agricultural land, continued to hold Labour back from full-blooded state ownership. Instead, a development charge of 100 per cent would be levied on land that gained in value because it was granted planning permission: all 'betterment' would thus fall to the state. A one-off fund of £300m was established to make *ex gratia* payments to those who might lose out once plans were extended throughout the country. Uthwatt had recommended that all land rights be vested in the state, and then leased back. Instead, the private market was to continue, though subject to planning control and development charges that would gradually make compensation and prior valuations irrelevant. It was an important distinction, and one that would eventually make liberalisation easier.¹⁵

The planning system now covered the entire country; all gains and losses from its operation were nationalised. Hugh Dalton wound up the Parliamentary debate for the government, and argued that land speculation had been 'stopped for ever ... the value of land from now is determined solely by its value for its existing use ... the land of this country has ... been misused and monopolized by some sections of the people. Somebody has said to me ... "This Bill is the workers' revenge for the enclosures". There is something to be said for that.'¹⁶ But there was little disguising that these measures were not as radical as Uthwatt had recommended. In agriculture, and in a situation recalling the post-First World War entrenchment of 'co-operation' and 'concentration' in capitalist agriculture, annual price reviews and subsidies were used to encourage the farming industry to adopt more modern practices under the Agriculture Act of 1947.¹⁷ Bevan colourfully argued in private that 'this policy would not get us a single extra turnip', but was defeated on this as well as on most of Labour's domestic agenda.¹⁸ Labour pragmatists such as Herbert Morrison praised increases in production through marketing, science and research, rather than the extirpation of large landowners.¹⁹

The Conservatives' *laissez-faire* interlude, 1951–62

Things were to get worse for those set on comprehensive town and country planning. Labour's system of land compensation and development was extensively liberalised in the 1950s, though that has been partly concealed by Macmillan's otherwise *dirigiste* methods in reaching his 300,000 annual housebuilding target.²⁰ The outgoing Labour government had already issued guidance in 1950 and 1951 outlining a rather narrow interpretation of the

1947 Act, and stressing that it should be used for 'physical' planning rather than to secure wider economic and social objectives.²¹ Now Conservative activists and business fundraisers lobbied hard for the Act to be repealed altogether. They were enraged by *cause célèbres* such as the death of Edward Pilgrim, who committed suicide in September 1954 when his local council in Romford compulsorily purchased an allotment next to his house at 'existing use' value – a sum far below the mortgage he was already paying for the plot. Along with the notorious Crichel Down imbroglio, the case became a byword for bureaucratic inhumanity and the state control of everyday life.²²

Ministers proceeded more cautiously than the Conservative rank-and-file wanted, fearful of appearing once more as the landowners' party. Betterment charges and compensation were abolished with effect from November 1952, and only those owners actually denied planning permission were to receive compensatory payments. However, under the 1953 and 1954 Town and Country Planning Acts local councils could still compulsorily purchase land and pay only any 1947 development value. That concession to the public sector was removed altogether in 1959, following yet another concerted backbench Conservative campaign.²³

Other key elements of the 1940s strategy were significantly altered, however. As opposed to the planned dispersal and redevelopment envisaged in Scott and Barlow, the population in the putative green belt was allowed to expand by default. The Conservatives relied on *ad hoc* negotiations between urban councils and other local authorities. This was the idea behind the 1952 Town Development Act. Though the idea was contained in the Barlow Report as one possible policy tool, and much of the Act had already been drafted under Labour, the Conservatives seized on it as an alternative to New Towns.²⁴ Duncan Sandys as Macmillan's successor at Housing was happy to take the political credit for reinforcing the green belt concept in a famous 1955 Circular on the subject, but it would clearly be many years before they were all ready. In the meantime, many thousands of houses were built in those areas, all the more quickly because even tighter controls were clearly going to be activated over the medium term.²⁵

Local authority housing developments were forced back into the cities, at residential densities and using new high-rise and automated building techniques that made no economic sense compared to settling families further away from urban areas – on land that would be much cheaper in the first place.²⁶ It was, of course, a rebuilding which at least claimed the 'new urbanism' as its intellectual justification – though in reality councils had been confined to their own areas by the difficulties of negotiating dispersal under the Town Development Act. Furthermore, the inner-city building boom further exacerbated the changes wrought by the liberalisation of the compensation system. Even the Treasury minister Henry Brooke admitted that the price rises were due to 'pent up forces' that had been released now that 'market value was restored as the normal value for compensation'.²⁷

The rising price of land was often blamed at the time for the house price increases that were posing such difficult problems for politicians.²⁸ The price of land was to rise by 50 per cent during the 1960s, steadily increasing its share in the overall cost of houses. The most acute rise was concentrated in the early 1960s.²⁹ Between 1960 and 1964 land prices rose at an annual rate of 10 per cent.³⁰ In the outer suburbs of London, there were 640 per cent increases in plot value in the decade from 1952.³¹ The pressure of housing development, and the housing shortage, was one key motor. The price of land planned to take public and private housing rose by 223 and 204 per cent respectively, between 1961 and 1966; agricultural land by 195 per cent.³² The nominal price of housebuilding land would triple again by the end of the post-war boom in 1973–74. By that time the share of land in each house's price had risen from 7 to 14 per cent.³³ In the area around London, land prices took up 12 per cent of the costs of new houses in 1960, but 30 per cent by 1970.³⁴

The case for land price rises as the primary cause of booming house prices in post-war Britain remains, at best, unproven: the most detailed econometric models, using 1990s data, have estimated that releasing all uncommitted and green belt land might only have reduced medium-term prices by 5 to 7 per cent.³⁵ All the same, rising land prices were at least adding to the pressure on governments, and were perceived to be part of the problem. They rose particularly quickly in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as well as in the early 1970s, as Figure 8.1 demonstrates. The slow process of getting planning permission, when demand was building up so quickly, meant that builders' reaction to price rises was slow and uncertain, especially during a building boom that was worrying many preservationist local authorities. Housing supply in Britain would be relatively unresponsive to price changes throughout this period, compared to the international average.³⁶

The Conservatives' interventionist phase, 1962–64

It soon became obvious that the Town Development Act could not mobilise either the technical staff, or the political support, to make any large-scale contribution to the decentralisation of the urban population: by 1960 its effect was limited to a few thousand houses around Swindon and Bletchley.³⁷ Even by 1968, the number of arrangements made between urban councils and 'reception' authorities had reached 66, with a target of 162,240 houses – although only 56,669 of these had actually been built. Large conurbations such as Manchester were prevented from moving people out of the city by the surrounding counties, in this case Cheshire, which had no intention of allowing the city to develop a site at Lymm. Birmingham likewise suffered frustration at the hands of Worcestershire when it proposed to build at Whythall.³⁸ Eventually Ministry officials lost patience with being blamed



Figure 8.1 Land and house prices, Great Britain, 1945–79 (1975 = 100)

Source: P. Cheshire, 'Spatial Containment, Housing Affordability and Price Stability – Irreconcilable Goals', *LSE Spatial Economics Research Centre Policy Paper 4*, 2009, fig. 1, p. 4. I am grateful to Professor Cheshire for releasing to me the original data on which this work rests.

when their mediation efforts failed. 'It is said', Housing minister Charles Hill remarked ruefully, 'that we have done nothing at all for Manchester except shoot down every suggestion the City Council has made.'³⁹

Meanwhile, a political storm was growing over the profits that developers could make under this semi-planned system. Very quick rises in land prices, exacerbated by liberalisation under the constraint of new planning controls on local authorities and the green belt, of course allowed some builders and investors to become very rich indeed. The journalist Oliver Marriott famously concluded that just over a hundred men and women had made £1m each from the post-war 'property boom'. They were aided by loopholes in the relevant legislation, for instance the notorious 'Schedule 3' of the 1947 Act, which allowed up to 10 per cent to be added to the floorspace of offices. Developers simply tore down old Victorian blocks and constructed large new offices without the need for the high ceilings, large stairwells and thick walls of the old buildings. The office space thus provided was much greater than that in the old building, and far beyond what they would have been allowed to build anew.⁴⁰ The concession was stopped in 1963, but not before it had helped to create the impression that property developers were out of control.

Internal Conservative Party memoranda expressed a desire to adopt fashionable 'city region' planning techniques as early as 1960. This would see a build-up of new and expanded urban areas *outside* cities' green belts,

and continue to insist on tight controls around the edges of cities themselves.⁴¹ Within two years, ministers were thinking much more radically. Keith Joseph was prepared to admit that 'only central government have the resources and the will to carry through major expansions or to open up new sites ... we have got to be prepared to start some more New Towns'.⁴² The case was so obvious that although Treasury officials thought that 'a good deal of thought needed to be given to the financial implications', they privately 'did not dispute that further New Towns would probably be needed'.⁴³ By December Joseph was pressing Macmillan for 'authority to start, at once, a new town close to Birmingham, [and] another close to Liverpool (both really "expanded towns" but beyond the capacity of local government)'. 'Before too long', he wrote, 'I would like to be able to promise a succession of new towns.'⁴⁴

Joseph continued his campaign throughout 1963, pressing for town expansions at Redditch (for Birmingham) and Runcorn (for Liverpool) to be taken over by central government. He also wanted an announcement that the government was looking for a site in south-east Lancashire, to force through the relief of Manchester. The Cabinet agreed, in order to still demands for even more New Towns.⁴⁵ Planning was already underway for more public housing to be readied for the second stage: the Ministry upgraded its New Towns targets to 13,600 per year for the later 1960s.⁴⁶ Moreover, detailed policy work on where and when to site the new housing was nearly complete. Major extensions to Ipswich, Northampton, Peterborough, Portsmouth, Southampton and Swindon were to be considered: two New Towns built (Bletchley, later to become Milton Keynes, and most of what now constitutes Newbury in Berkshire) might take 150,000 people by 1981, and up to 400,000 over the 'very long term'.⁴⁷

Both Hill and Joseph still hoped to foster New Towns in which private owner-occupation was the dominant form of tenure.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the proposals contained in the Ministry's *South East Study* mainly applied to extending older conurbations faster than local authorities could manage, and building more houses in older New Towns. To that extent their U-turn was less radical than it appeared. Joseph pleaded this case to his own backbenchers:

An all over expansion would be needed if we were going to contain the population growth ... and at the same time preserve the green belts and areas of natural scenic beauty. It would be much more economic if we expanded existing towns rather than built entirely new ones ... the first generation ... [of New Towns were designed] for fixed population levels. This was in a period before the 'population explosion' had taken place ... [and now it] was undesirable to consider building New Towns in the South East whilst existing New Towns could be expanded, or where older towns could be rejuvenated or rebuilt.⁴⁹

Regional plans for housing would take the form of government advance purchases of land required for development, thus providing the framework for rapid *private* housebuilding, which would predominate.⁵⁰

This was a far cry from the land policy some influential Tories were pressing for, and fell a long way short of that considered, and rejected, by the Cabinet in 1963–64. Influential backbenchers such as Frederick Corfield and Sir Colin Thornton-Kemsley pressed throughout the early 1960s for the resumption of taxation on land. Although the 1961 Conservative Policy Committee of which Thornton-Kemsley was the chairman and Corfield was a member stopped short of recommending such a tax, it was clearly split, for instance going beyond the *South East Study* in proposing the development of ‘focal points’ just beyond the green belts of parent cities and recommending strengthened powers for urban councils who wished to decant their population. The committee also reported the wishes of some of its members, that a government landholding body should be set up to aid urban local authorities with redevelopment, buying up land and holding it until councils’ comprehensive development plans were prepared. The means by which such a body would be funded remained a moot point, since the obvious way was a land tax.⁵¹

The trouble with such proposals was the protests they would inevitably evoke, not just from *laissez-faire* liberals in the party, but from county councillors who resented the interference with ‘their’ planning procedures. Thus Michael Fraser secretly forwarded the committee’s report – entitled *Change and Challenge* – to Brooke, who was reported to be ‘not at all happy with what he read’. A subcommittee of the party’s Advisory Committee on Policy was appointed. Butler brokered a deal between the Policy Committee and ACP, under which the ACP would put forward amendments. Recognising the pertinence of Butler’s injunction that ‘your aim is for impact rather than explosion’, the Policy Committee eventually accepted 14 drafting changes, which brought local authorities back into their proposed regional planning structure.⁵² The suggestions about a landholding authority were not taken up, for at this point Brooke’s insistence that ‘we have to accept that a firm planning control is bound to result in higher prices for land’ was accepted.⁵³ Reimposition of land taxes had been rejected.

Part of the resistance came from officials at the Ministry of Housing, where confidence was high that the regional studies would release enough land to ensure a stabilisation in land prices. Joseph argued that ‘we have got to get a great deal more land allocated to building ... I have attacked this in two ways: breaking the immediate bottle-necks which are holding up the great cities, while we try to clear the way for 20 years ahead by means of the regional plans.’⁵⁴ But the problems with the green belt remained, as shown by an inconclusive meeting between Joseph and Douglas-Home on 17 December 1963, at which both men weighed the opposite political dangers of building on green belt land, or allowing price rises to go on as they

were.⁵⁵ The Treasury, however, noting the potential for new revenue, the possibility of damping down demand and a chance to hold back large-scale advance purchases by central government, was exploring the possibility of a new development charge. Joseph and his officials seized upon this possibility as a way out of the impasse. Permanent Secretaries had agreed to explore this possibility at a meeting back in November.⁵⁶

Joseph urged that land taxation was politically necessary, aiding the government's pay policy by showing that speculators and not just wage-earners were being hit. Maudling as Chancellor was also minded to agree – so long as any charge remained part of the Revenue's collection of capital gains tax. The government had gone some way down this road, introducing a short-term capital gains tax in 1962 to discourage speculative buying and hoarding of land. Joseph now argued that in the present shortage of land and housing – exacerbated by the planning control system – there was no such thing as a 'market price' that should not be disturbed. Other ministers considered that the £8 million per annum yield of such a development charge at 30 per cent was not worth the political capital they would lose by introducing it. They would simply be seen as opportunists.⁵⁷

Joseph was defeated on this, despite his plea that 'we are letting the Opposition take all the credit for being prepared to do *something* in a matter on which large sections of public opinion feel strongly that something ought to be done'. The majority view was that it would be best 'to take their stand on the fact that any tax would be liable to increase the price of land'. Most ministers were swayed by a mixture of ideological attachment to the free market the Conservatives had, after all, resuscitated, and a feeling that Joseph's case for more charges was incompatible with releasing extra land for development in the first place. The Prime Minister was further prompted by his personal aide, Nigel Lawson, to look into some sort of development charge to tax away the profits of the 'speculators' so derided in the press. Corfield and Thornton-Kemsley also urged some action to counter Labour's campaigning on this issue.⁵⁸ But though Douglas-Home concluded that the options should be further studied, the Cabinet concluded that they would simply 'retain an open mind' in the forthcoming election.⁵⁹

Labour and the establishment of the Land Commission

Labour now proposed to go back to some of the principles spelt out in the Uthwatt Report, and embodied in the 1947 Act, while avoiding full nationalisation or municipalisation of land, the preferred solution of many within the party. A Land Commission, funded by taxation on development gains, would buy up all land for development; it would then release that land at preferential prices to both the private and public sectors. Gaitskill as leader had pledged Labour to this idea in *Signposts for the Sixties*, and was the personal author of some of the most radical sections of that document's chapter

on land.⁶⁰ The idea replaced ‘municipalisation’, by which local authorities would gradually buy up all rented property in their districts. This policy had been Labour’s panacea for the appalling state of the British housing stock in the 1950s – and a replacement for the betterment levies that had proved so difficult to administer between 1947 and 1953. But the idea had proved unpopular in the 1959 election, all too easily painted as a sinister and bureaucratic ‘Prussianization of ordinary life’.⁶¹

The new and more flexible policy allowed Labour to build bridges with the planning professions. The Town and Country Planning Association and the traditionally much more conservative Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors also came round to some form of renewed land taxation in the interim.⁶² Centrist or apparently ‘neutral’ and ‘expert’ opinion formers, such as the LSE Professor of Economics Alan Day, had been gradually persuaded of the need for a betterment charge, if not an interventionist Land Commission.⁶³ The nonsensical dual planning system of the 1950s and the very fast rise in the price of land zoned for development, all of which had accrued to owners and developers, seemed to constitute an unanswerable case.⁶⁴ Wilson’s campaigning was in this situation extremely skilful, for he was blending together populist attacks on ‘speculators’, the apparent tired ‘corruption’ of a long-serving Conservative administration, and the more traditional Liberal trope of ‘the people’s land’. The theme of ‘essential’ rather than frivolous ‘inessential’ building duly became a central theme in Labour’s 1964 campaign, and its first two years in office.⁶⁵ A Town and Country Planning Association conference held in early 1966 approved of Labour’s eventual Bill. Wyndham Thomas, Director of the Association and a member of Labour’s Study Group on the problem while in Opposition, said there that it ‘provides a realistic, practical and pragmatic first step in collecting betterment, organising land supply, and helping the planning machinery’.⁶⁶ Conservative officials, including the Research Department, and Lawson – now at the *Financial Times* – concluded that the land question helped cost the Tories the 1964 election.⁶⁷

Other ideas also appealed to the party’s Study Group that looked into the question, for the same electoral pressures that had herded the Conservatives towards intervening in the land market still applied. Wilson’s Labour Party never refused an opportunity to appeal to middle-class and aspirant voters. It was therefore proposed that the Commission might allow some housebuilders to buy rights to build on some of its land at concessionary prices, to speed up the development process.⁶⁸ That land could also then be leased to semi-private or cost-price owners (perhaps housing associations) on long lets – to be known as ‘Crownhold’.⁶⁹ Labour was thus to some extent returning to the Uthwatt Committee’s idea that all land rights would be nationalised, but the owners left *in situ* until they actually wanted to sell on or build. Labour had rejected this idea as too radical in 1947.⁷⁰ Fred Willey, the new Ministry of Land’s head once Labour won the October 1964 election, believed initially

that 'the Commission should ultimately become the sole purchaser of virtually all land coming into development or redevelopment'.⁷¹

It was at this point that some familiar reasons for retreat presented themselves. Labour's critics have given insufficient weight to the administrative and political problems inherent in the venture. The 'global' solution, vesting overriding planning functions with the Land Commission, was initially heavily favoured within the Ministry of Land – at least as regards land already zoned for housing in development plans, and on land where planning permission had already been granted.⁷² Landowners would have had only very limited rights of appeal, and would only have been able to object on the basis that the land should not be developed at all.⁷³ But the danger that land would not be given up for years, while the Commission assembled the necessary expertise in valuation, mapping and procedure, helped to stymie this solution.⁷⁴

Even the Ministry of Land itself accepted the case for restraint by early 1965, accepting that there were simply not enough valuers to allow the government to purchase compulsorily even a minority of building land. The Ministry of Housing had already made the same point several times in bilateral meetings.⁷⁵ Chartered surveyors and valuers themselves wrote to the Chancellor, to the Treasury and also to the Revenue to make just the same point.⁷⁶ The housing drive, the Ministry of Land now accepted, would be critically slowed if it had to wait for the Land Commission to find its feet.⁷⁷ The final White Paper was, therefore, inevitably a compromise measure. It invoked the Uthwatt Report and its recommendation that a central government body should make widespread use of compulsory purchase; but the Land Commission would only 'buy substantial areas of land' once they had 'fully built up their organisation'. The Commission would eventually be able to secure any land that was *suitable* for development, rather than that which had planning permission. But this would have to await a ministerial decision to transfer those powers, and a separate vote in the House of Commons.⁷⁸

The Conservatives were open to the idea of some sort of land levy while John Boyd-Carpenter was Shadow Spokesman for Housing until the 1966 General Election. He spoke to that effect in the debate on the Queen's Speech in November 1965, and on the Second Reading of the Bill itself.⁷⁹ But the team of Geoffrey Rippon, Graham Page and Margaret Thatcher that later faced the Bill in Parliament was bitterly opposed to the whole concept of separate betterment charges as well as the Land Commission. 'This is a dreadful Bill,' Rippon argued when the Bill came back through Parliament: 'the Government have created an endless prospect of dissension, bitterness and strife, and ... an endless prospect of confusion'. Page predicted 'chaos and disaster to building development' and condemned a Bill full of 'frills' that would 'ensure that the unfortunate John Citizen does not escape from the tentacles of this bureaucratic octopus'.⁸⁰ This campaign had practical

consequences for the Commission, for it encouraged landowners to believe that a Conservative government would indeed repeal the Act. They were thus given every encouragement, as they had been in the late 1940s and early 1950s, to withhold their land from market – forcing land prices up, rather than bringing them down. It was a danger pointed out at the time by both Callaghan and Balogh.⁸¹

The promised development levy came out at 40 per cent, rather than the 70 per cent desired by the Ministry of Land even after they accepted the limits the Commission would have to labour under in its first few years; Land Commission powers of acquisition were limited to exactly the same compulsory purchase regulations to which other departments were subject, though the minister could speed up this process if he were so minded; small landowners were exempted from the levy.⁸² Ministers decided at a series of meetings in No. 10 that widespread compulsory purchase was simply too ‘drastic’, and ‘might well be defeated in Parliament’.⁸³ Various commentators and historians have therefore argued that the Commission was ‘really only a partial affair, for in essence a fully effective Commission would be empowered to exercise rights of purchase in respect of land over a certain size for which planning permission was being sought’.⁸⁴

Organisational inertia reinforced the impression of failure. The Land Commission was supposed to be the central responsibility of a new Ministry of Land and Natural Resources, which would deal with all aspects of physical planning. But Crossman did his best to limit the Commission’s powers to ‘the assembly of sites for comprehensive development’, or to helping local authorities – his Ministry’s traditional clients and partners.⁸⁵ In a set-piece Whitehall battle, the Ministry of Housing prevented any usurpation of its planning functions, much to the annoyance of Wilson himself.⁸⁶ On this occasion Evelyn Sharp, Permanent Secretary at Housing, used all her connections and experience to thwart the emasculation of her fiefdom.⁸⁷ ‘I always win,’ she told Crossman: ‘but it was exhausting.’ She had never really been convinced by the arguments for land taxes, and doubted whether such policies could really act as a brake on house prices.⁸⁸ Civil servants in her department told the Cabinet Office that ‘the price of land cannot be artificially reduced ... [and] any measure to recover for the community part of the betterment ... may perhaps increase the vendor’s asking price’.⁸⁹ By the middle of 1965 Sharp, Helsby and Crossman had managed to outmanoeuvre the Minister of Land, Fred Willey, and agreed on the break-up of the infant Ministry.⁹⁰ Once he was in charge, following the General Election of 1966 and planning coming fully back under his Ministry of Housing, Crossman re-emphasised the Land Commission’s role in helping small builders rather than any general planning role the Commission might have taken up.⁹¹

Ministers were faced with other unpleasant facts that they had not thought of in Opposition. If they were to give money from betterment levy to local authorities or private sector developers in order to lower the price

of houses, they would run two risks. The first was that help to local government was politically dangerous, in practice if not in principle.⁹² Richer local authorities might press to recover all of the betterment value paid in their areas – the recurrent dilemma of hypothecation. Councils in expensive urban areas might also struggle to pay the existing use cost for sites, let alone the cost of development land. So paying local authorities out of the betterment value of the difference would not necessarily help. Willey's ministerial opponents argued that any amounts dispersed would appear 'derisory', at least for the first few years while the betterment levy slowly came in, and bring the system into disrepute.⁹³ The second danger was that there was nothing to stop owner-occupiers aided in this way simply realising the capital gain the government had provided them with.⁹⁴ At the back of their minds was the memory of the two-price system the 1956 Town and Country Planning Act had inadvertently created, with 'official' and 'market' prices in simultaneous use.

The search began for a face-saving solution, which 'might go some way politically to satisfy our pledges while at the same time ... also be workable'. This was the origin of the 'second appointed day' on which the Commission's full powers would be activated, a device which served to placate the Ministry of Housing (still watchful of its planning responsibilities) and negotiate the difficult first phase of Land Commission operation, when it simply would not have the resources to plan for all land use.⁹⁵ This was the package eventually accepted by the Cabinet, subject to the political presentation of 'Crownhold' as a potential source of lower house prices.⁹⁶ Once again, Wilson was deeply unhappy with this conclusion: Crossman feared that Willey had 'made Harold believe I was in the pocket of the Dame [Sharp] and battling for reaction against their honest-to-God Socialism'. Crossman, who had successfully (for now) defended Housing's planning functions, believed Wilson to be an 'extremist' on this question.⁹⁷ Wilson resented the necessity of retreating from his 1964 pledges. But he had little choice.⁹⁸

Action and inaction at the Land Commission

The actual operation of the Commission grants some validity to these sceptical interpretations. The 'second appointed day' never materialised, as indeed ministers had promised the Scottish Landowners Association and others as early as the autumn of 1966.⁹⁹ The Commission did, indeed, take years to assemble, though it was just beginning to carve out a role when the Labour government fell in 1970, a year in which it bought up nearly ten thousand acres of land.¹⁰⁰ The Cabinet Office believed when it was established that it might build up to owning half the country's development land within six to eight years – disposing, therefore, of sites for 65,000 private houses, 15,000 houses built by Housing Associations and 25,000 'Crownhold' properties.¹⁰¹ As late as spring 1967, the Ministry of Housing (which had taken over the

Commission) and even the Treasury hoped that the Land Commission could release 50,000 housing plots a year for private builders within three years.¹⁰²

In practice it got nowhere near as far. By the time Labour prepared for the 1970 General Election campaign the Commission had acquired just 1780 acres of land for £4.5m net of levy, and had resold 214 acres for £400,000. Though it got slightly further by the time it was wound up, we can follow its progress in Table 8.1. The levy at its peak brought in £32m a year; the Commission managed to spend £4.6m of that in 1969/70, buying up 1261 acres of land. That was very far from the land required for the hoped-for 100,000 dwelling plots. Even five-storey flats might give a dwellings-per-acre figure of 14 to 24; this meant that the Land Commission was buying up land that even if it had all been in prime housing locations, and had all been developed as flats, would only have held 25,000 dwellings.¹⁰³ Wilson, on hearing this and of the 'excessive caution on the part of local planning authorities in ... allocating ... land for housing', concluded that 'the Land Commission could not make any substantial contribution to the housing programme in the immediate future'.¹⁰⁴ 'Crownhold' was hardly used at all, since the government's enthusiasm waned when the scale of this new and additional subsidy to the Housing Association movement became clear.¹⁰⁵ The idea of allocating land to private housing developers at preferential rates foundered on the question of making those disposals on a fair basis. The idea of a lottery was rejected within Whitehall as too arbitrary, and likely to give rise to endless complaints.¹⁰⁶

A concerted press and semi-popular campaign continued to dog the Land Commission. Conservative tabloids dubbed the whole idea 'absurd', and argued that vendors were simply passing on extra costs as higher land prices.¹⁰⁷ A number of high-profile cases recalled Crichel Down and the Pilgrim case. Two Harwell scientists who were charged £460 each for a land deal on which they had gained a total profit of £80 had their case taken up

Table 8.1 Direct financial and land transactions of the Land Commission, 1967/68–70/71

	<i>Net levy charged</i>	<i>Gross spending on land</i>	<i>Acres purchased</i>	<i>Acres sold</i>
1967/68	£1.6m	£2.1m	n/a*	n/a
1968/69	£8.1m	£3.6m	945	6
1969/70	£30.1m	£4.6m	1261	312
1970/71	£32.0m	£1.7m	1078	588

Source: Land Commission, *Reports and Accounts of the Land Commission* (1967/68), p. 7 and table 1, p. 23; (1968/69), v, appendix I, p. 12, and table 1, pp. 14–15; (1969/70), v, p. 2, and table 1, pp. 16–17; (1970/71), pp. 3, 4 and table 1, pp. 18–19.

* In 1967/68 1500 acres of acquisitions were approved for future business.

by the Conservative MP Airey Neave, who referred it to the Ombudsman. He referred six more cases in the spring of 1968. Neave constantly emphasised the 'injustice' involved, though the Ombudsman found no evidence of maladministration.¹⁰⁸ Opposition to the Commission grew gradually in strength. When Desmond Heap, Chairman of the Town and Country Planning Association, wrote to *The Times* in March 1969, he noted that by this stage 'the Land Commission is in the news again, indeed, when it is ever out?' Willey himself argued that given the Conservatives' renewed opposition, it was 'not surprising that a campaign is being waged against the Land Commission'.¹⁰⁹

The Land Commission was beginning to look both absurd and unnecessary, a dangerous position for such a new and innovative semi-public body.¹¹⁰ The Ministry of Housing had to encourage the Commission to buy more land in April 1967 and early in 1968.¹¹¹ Ministers considered abolishing it altogether during the public expenditure cuts exercise of summer 1968, since it 'had acquired hardly any land ... [and] its continued existence would become a political embarrassment'.¹¹² A departmental review concluded that the 'slow going' was partly due to the difficulties in building up enough expertise and staff. But there were 'more important' reasons: local authorities' greater power in the planning process, and indeed as landowners themselves; the huge expenditure involved before the betterment levy had really begun to come in; and private vendors selling up as soon as they found the Land Commission was interested in their holdings. Officials concluded that the Commission could and should be pushed into a more 'forward' attitude with local authorities. The Ministry of Housing's about-face, having defended councils from the Ministry of Land in 1964–65, is a measure of their frustration with local government at this point.¹¹³ The Ministry's August 1967 instructions to local authorities – that they should give up more land for building – were in part prompted by a rather reluctant desire to do something to deal with the Land Commission's arguments.¹¹⁴

Ministers stayed their hand, for presentational as well as these practical reasons, and agreed to encourage the Land Commission in its difficult dealings with local authorities.¹¹⁵ Even so, some modifications were becoming politically necessary.¹¹⁶ 'Hardship' cases were mounting up, and most MPs faced a stream of worried letters about both real and rumoured Land Commission projects. They duly passed these on to the relevant minister.¹¹⁷ Landlords were paying surtax and income tax on their tenants' payments, as well as betterment levy; professional fees, such as those paid by the Harwell scientists, could cut deep into returns, but were not to be counted in levy assessments.¹¹⁸ In April 1969 the government announced that all land with a sale price under £1500 would be exempted from levy; houses that did not yield over £10,000, and were not sited on over a quarter of an acre of land, were also removed from the charge. Gifts of property, solely for the use of the recipient, were also to be free of levy.¹¹⁹ This last change, for owners developing houses that they owned and had been given to them as gifts, was

allowed retrospectively, for the whole of the Commission's period of operations to date.¹²⁰ The government's refusal to consider retrospection for the other cases of hardship was again the subject of press disapproval.¹²¹

The Commission did eventually begin to tackle local authority opposition, trying to override their conservative planning practices by urging them to give up land for development. The minutes of the DEA's new Planning Boards and Councils reveal very difficult relations between Land Commission representatives (when they attended) and local authority members – especially in East Anglia and the South-East, where the pressure on land was at its fiercest, and where the Commission felt it might use the Planning Boards to play some role in redevelopment.¹²² Some local authority officials, for instance Manchester's Town Clerk Sir Philip Dingle, were willing to criticise the Commission in public. Willey countered that he was 'talking through his hat'.¹²³ By the time of its second report in 1968, the Commission was clear that its work was being impeded by local councils' planning policies, 'which are directed at the containment of urban growth and the preservation of open country'.¹²⁴ The Standing Committee on London and South-East Regional Planning, mainly consisting of local council representatives, obstructed the Land Commission's attempts to accelerate planning permission. They adopted the time-honoured tradition of a committee to 'establish the facts' instead.¹²⁵ Relations with local government representatives on the Eastern, Southern and London boards were also very difficult.¹²⁶

Even so, the levy's unfavourable terms for landowners had unfortunate effects, since in conditions of scarcity it served only to raise the price. With every expectation of the return to power of a Conservative Party openly hostile to the whole idea of land taxation, withholding land from the market became increasingly widespread. The prospect of the 'second appointed day', and of widespread direction of near-urban developments, worried developers and appeared to threaten the profits they expected from their investment.¹²⁷ This phenomenon has to be seen in an economic and a regional context, rather than just a failure to live up to arbitrary estimates of future Land Commission acreage. The £45m yearly income of the Commission (backed up by borrowing from the Treasury, as well as by the betterment levy) was not large enough to act as more than an irritant in a land market with a £1.2bn annual turnover. One estimate reckoned that only 5 per cent of all development land, and under 1 per cent of all land, might at that rate have been secured by the Land Commission by 1980.¹²⁸ Only about a hundred acres were released onto the market in the south-east of England, and only a tiny four acres in the West Midlands – the subject of more astonished questions in the Public Accounts Committee during December 1969.¹²⁹

Methods imported from economics might have clarified some of the main issues. Tools from the new 'regional' or 'local' economics such as

input-output analysis, econometric modelling and mathematical models derived from transport economics were becoming increasingly accessible and influential.¹³⁰ But it was the late 1960s before housing and planning economists were employed by the new Department of the Environment.¹³¹ As J.B. Cullingworth has noted, it remained the fact that 'economic analysis plays a very minor role in British land-use planning'. Private builders, operating on market principles, and planners, who have remained wedded to Dalton's ethics of 'fair' and 'proper' use, remained so far apart that their different discourses seemed 'unreal' one to the other.¹³² It proved extremely difficult to operationalise new economic concepts, and for instance to specify non-quantitative variables such as the loss of rural landscapes.¹³³

The Land Commission experienced difficulty even when it simply asked for statistics and information from the Ministry of Housing, let alone requesting detailed regional and national data.¹³⁴ National land price statistics were not available except in the crudest form until very late in the 1960s. Central government only started collecting detailed figures even for local authority land purchases in 1965, and the numbers remained crude well into the 1970s.¹³⁵ When the Commission proposed to investigate development on 'white land' during 1968 – claiming a key role in redeveloping land on the urban periphery which did not already have planned uses – the Ministry concluded that 'alas, we have not the slightest chance of being able to give a firm figure for the variables [involved]'.¹³⁶ District valuers, the shortage of which stalled Labour's 'comprehensive' scheme in the first place, could only report property exchange prices many months after purchases had been settled.¹³⁷ The Commission's own officials were taking more than six months to gather data on land availability in the south-east of England during 1968. Multiple ownership cases were particularly complex and slow to resolve.¹³⁸ Building companies' representatives were very unhappy about the incomplete and unhelpful nature of the returns.¹³⁹

The price of land was and is an inherently complicated subject, but during the post-Second World War era the simple effort of understanding the planning system became ever more difficult. Even Sir Ernest Simon, who had been Chair of Manchester's Housing Committee and worked on housing within the Ministry of Health before going on to work in the Second World War Ministry of Supply, remarked in 1945 that 'only lawyers can understand the elaborate complexities of the legal rights of ownership, [and] only surveyors can understand the complications of the peculiar and artificial system of the valuation of land'.¹⁴⁰ The Land Commission made the situation even more complex. Experts interviewed by *The Economist* argued in 1966 that 'this Bill has now become so complex that those who are sponsoring and ... criticising it are equally terribly uncertain about what it might do'.¹⁴¹

The Conservatives were committed to abolishing the Land Commission from the moment that Rippon, Page and Thatcher opposed the passage of

the Act creating it. They went about its dismemberment as quickly as they could during 1970 and 1971 – a draft report was ready within a month of the party's re-election – and the new government abolished the betterment levy at the same time as the Commission.¹⁴² Following several awkward cases reported in the newspapers, ministers were careful to instruct the Land Commission, and district valuers, to offer land back to 'reluctant' buyers. This would avoid 'Crichel Down' style cases where previous owners appealed against a government body selling off their land against their will.¹⁴³ But by and large the process of dismantling a system that had lasted for only three years went relatively smoothly. The work was handed over to the Inland Revenue before the collection of the betterment levy was even completed.¹⁴⁴ Land transactions would now be subject to capital gains tax rather than a special levy – a solution that Labour had considered, and rejected, in 1964–65.¹⁴⁵ At 30 per cent, this was a rather low rate by international standards.¹⁴⁶

Conclusions: the true costs of land-use planning

The Land Commission was yet another 'paradox in prosperity', as Keith Joseph made clear in the run-up to the 1964 General Election. The need for such a body was in the first place, as Joseph accepted, created by a rising population demanding to be better housed.¹⁴⁷ But its creation was also of a piece with that general contemporary enthusiasm for separating 'expert' independent agencies from direct ministerial control, promoted by the Fulton Report on the civil service and by Wilson's Labour governments in general. The Land Commission's remit to speed up development can be seen as working in parallel with other attempts at apparently 'disinterested' economic regeneration – for instance the creation of the Highlands and Islands Development Board (1964), the British Tourist Authority (1969) and the hiving off of the Post Office as a separate institution (also 1969).¹⁴⁸

The Land Commission, however, proved no answer at all to the real reasons for high land prices: and it had the far-from-welcome consequence of actually pushing up the price of property under conditions of planned scarcity. Anthony Greenwood eventually reached a similar conclusion, writing to Wilson in June 1968 that 'the original assumption of a widespread programme of compulsory purchase was based on a misconception, namely that high land prices were being caused by land hoarding. The bottleneck is not hoarding but a shortage of land with planning permission ... around London and other big cities.'¹⁴⁹ Though it should also be noted that, uncited by other historians, Greenwood went on to make clear that 'the Land Commission [will] have a major role to play in all this. What we have to bring about is the ... winning of the co-operation of local planning authorities. If we can achieve this the Land Commission will be an increasingly valuable instrument of Government policy.'¹⁵⁰ The Commission's assembly

of large land plots, and its role in urging on local authorities' planning efforts, are easy to overlook, but might have become an important link in the housing chain had the Commission continued its work.¹⁵¹

The 1967 Act was, however, undermined by the fact that developers and landowners believed that the Conservatives would repeal the Act upon their return to power. The sociologist Andrew Cox has long argued that this constituted one 'penalty' imposed by Britain's two-party and adversary system of government where the major parties disagreed – as they did, bitterly and symbolically, on questions of actual ownership. Hence the virulent Conservative campaign against the Land Commission as a danger to property.¹⁵² Labour would try again to capture some of the 'community gain' involved in land-use planning. A development land tax was fixed at 80 per cent in 1976, though the first £10,000 of any development was exempt. The proceeds went to a 'pool' shared between central and local government, and which could only be used for land purchase. But this, too, was abolished when the Conservatives returned to power, in this case under Mrs Thatcher in 1980.¹⁵³

High land and house prices were of course one effect of land-use planning and its restraint on the provision of building land. The share of land costs in West Midlands housebuilding rose from 12.5 per cent in 1965 to 20.7 per cent in 1970, at a time when rising relative national prosperity should have meant that land became *less* important as a share of national wealth.¹⁵⁴ It is difficult to be precise about the effects of the land-use planning system *overall* – though it has certainly been regressive in terms of income, channelling prosperity and security away from the young and relatively poor, and towards older owner-occupiers.¹⁵⁵ Rising house prices and the delays inherent in the planning process have possibly also destabilised and slowed UK economic growth.¹⁵⁶ The most conservative estimates of the premium put on land by the planning system by the 1980s and 1990s – through delays and the cost of the whole process, as well as land held back from the market – were that land-use controls might have added more than 10 per cent to house prices.¹⁵⁷ Other economists think that up to a third of house prices might be due to the constraints put on the land market by the planning system.¹⁵⁸ Land allocated to housing in the south of England can be valued at anything up to 50 times that of agricultural land; no clearer indicator of scarcity is necessary.¹⁵⁹

The Land Commission was an attempt to short-circuit the planning system that failed given constraints familiar from the rest of this book: rising expectations; administrative convolution; statistical confusion; party political controversy; and the increasingly intricate problems of an ever more complex society. But land reform and access remain matters of acute public controversy at the beginning of the twenty-first century. They are likely to remain so while a tiny minority of Britons – perhaps fewer than 200,000 families, including many descendants of those aristocrats against whom

Lloyd George directed his ire – own nearly three-quarters of all UK land.¹⁶⁰ Large landowners, including commercial and industrial operations, have first stabilised and then begun to reverse the large declines in the concentration of landholdings so evident in the later nineteenth century to the late 1950s.¹⁶¹ House and land prices have continued to rise exponentially over the past two decades, moving upwards even following the sharp recession of 2008–9 – developments that reflect the low numbers of dwellings actually constructed and the lack of planned development space. Landownership is highly concentrated, lessening competitive incentives to develop it; far too little land is released for development in the UK, far too slowly; population densities are only going to increase further.¹⁶² The Land Commission may have done little to remedy any of these problems, but the crisis with which it was meant to deal has hardly gone away.

Part IV
Educating the Nation

9

Planning the Education System in the Post-War Era

Education: increasing provision and continuing controversy

Britain's education system should have been an unmitigated success story in the 1960s, for it had fully shared in the gains of prosperity. Education spending had been growing steadily as a share of GDP since the 1840s, though it had been slowed by the Depression and the Second World War: this long-term shift of resources now continued, and indeed accelerated (see Figure 9.1). During the 1950s the Conservatives built thousands of new schools while still reducing pupil-teacher ratios; overall, they increased education outlays as a share of GDP from 2.6 per cent to 4.5 per cent.¹ This represented the steepest rise in education spending since a comprehensive system of state elementary education was established in the 1870s.² The 1960s were also marked by large spending increases, if not on quite so grand a scale: by the academic year 1970-71 real terms spending had nearly doubled again since 1960.³ Teacher numbers mounted; pupil-to-teacher ratios fell progressively (see Figures 9.2 and 9.3). And yet the paradox of this progress was that it elicited, not a general sense of satisfaction at the objectives achieved, but a constant sense of educational crisis – as we shall see.

The famous 1944 Education Act passed by the wartime coalition, the foundation stone of British education until the 1980s, was a complex web of concessions, compromises and vague enabling measures. All children were now to receive secondary education, and it was all to be governed by Local Education Authorities, but no dates were fixed for the school leaving age to rise to 15 and then 16; the former reform was in the event achieved in 1947-48. County Councils were usually to form LEAs, but town and city County Boroughs were to take responsibility if they were of a certain size. Aid for voluntary schools was to continue, but Roman Catholics in particular were extremely disappointed with the scale of the assistance offered. Above all, there was little guidance as to the types of schools or varieties of education that should be provided, a testament to the complexity of the measure and the desire of Churchill as Prime Minister and Butler, as

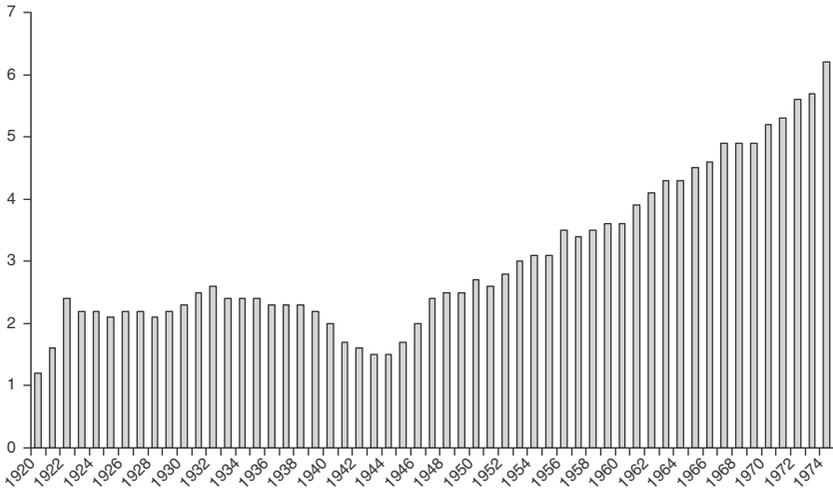
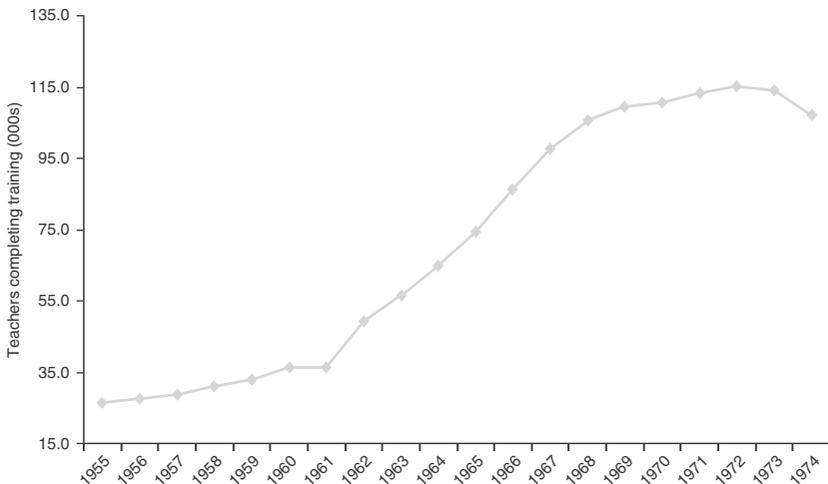
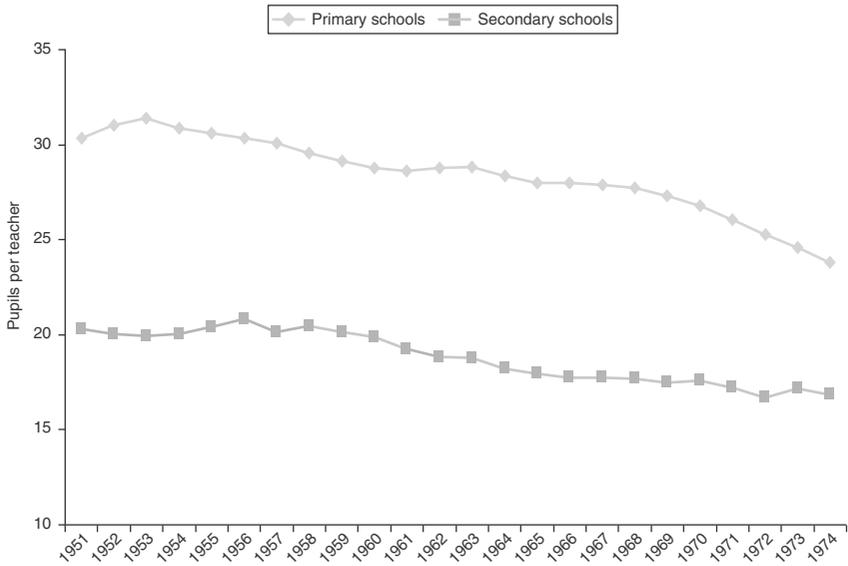


Figure 9.1 Education expenditure as a proportion of GNP, United Kingdom, 1920–74
 Sources: J. Vaizey, *The Costs of Education*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1958, table III, p. 76;
 B. Simon, *Education and the Social Order, 1940–1990*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1991, table
 15, p. 599.

President of the Board of Education, to avoid unnecessary controversy.⁴ Whatever their attempts to avoid such difficulties, acute policy dilemmas remained to haunt ministers and officials in the post-war era.

The 1950s and 1960s were a period during which politicians promised – and sometimes failed – to make impressive educational breakthroughs. Labour’s 1964 and 1966 manifestos promised ‘the largest school building programme in history’, along with more funding for technical training, day-release, universities, and teacher training to reduce class sizes. The National Plan correctly predicted that this would require spending in this sector to grow by one-third.⁵ As in other areas, however, Labour was not able to meet its promises in full. The rate of funding increases, which across most of the welfare state at least maintained the levels of 1959–64, was in fact lower than under the Conservatives. Planned spending was downgraded throughout Labour’s time in office, meaning that even though spending did rise, it did so more slowly than the government had hoped. By July 1968, successive spending cuts involved reductions in the planned budget of £122.7m.⁶ The most painful decision was that to postpone the raising of the school leaving age from 15 to 16, a reform that was supposed to take place in the academic year 1970–71. This reform was the one large and easily identifiable piece of social spending that could make a real impact on government expenditure, and that swung enough members of the Cabinet, which – although it split 12 to 9 in a very fraught discussion – endorsed deferment. The eventual



Figures 9.2 and 9.3 Pupil-teacher ratios and teacher training provision, Great Britain, 1951-74

Sources: B. Simon, *Education and the Social Order, 1940-1990*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1991, table 14a, p. 597; B.R. Mitchell, *British Historical Statistics*, Cambridge University Press, 1988, table 11, pp. 886-7; DES Scotland, *Statistics of Scottish Education* (1969), table 42, p. 122, *ibid.* (1972), table 46, p. 130, and *ibid.* (1974), table 62, p. 162.

effect of postponement was to push the whole building programme back by two years, and delay the raising of the school leaving age to 1972/73.⁷

These cuts may explain some of the debates that continued to rage around education, but they cannot explain politicians' need to keep promising rapid educational improvement. The late 1950s and the 1960s saw the government issue national plans for school building and teacher training, to name only two initiatives. Ministers throughout felt that they had to make increasingly ambitious plans, and take more control over the system – that in the words of one influential civil servant they had 'to run faster and faster to stay in the same place'.⁸ It is the intention of this chapter to explore the reasons why, despite a long history of effort, successive governments still felt it necessary to make more and more promises, and to engage in ever more ambitious experiments: it will then move on to explore their fate.

Popular demands and expert opinions

One simple reason for continued controversy was that central government had little control over estimates of need, since educational administration in Britain was highly decentralised. Local Education Authorities built schools, employed teachers and set the curriculum, or in the case of Church schools helped with the costs: as we have seen, the 1944 Education Act gave central government only the role of superintendent and co-ordinator. This was all the more obvious since the Ministry was divided up into branches, for example those responsible for Schools, Teachers I (Supply) and Teachers II (Training), all of which dealt with the institutions within their sphere on a case-by-case basis. Overall concern and co-ordination would therefore prove a problem.⁹ The clearest example of such problems was the annual round of complaints from LEAs at their approved building lists: this diffuse system meant that criticism and complaint would be heard all the louder.¹⁰

Rising levels of absolute demand were a second source of continuing strain. The Ministry's position up to the late 1950s was that 'the pressure of numbers will soon begin to subside'.¹¹ Indeed, planners were usually troubled by the assumption that fertility would continue to fall, or at least remain at its historically low levels, allowing parents to forego potential family income and leave their children in education and training for longer.¹² The government therefore got a rude shock as it became clear that the birth rate was not falling, but was in fact rising rapidly. In April 1958 the National Advisory Council on the Training and Supply of Teachers projected that the rising birth rate would raise the number of pupils by 27,000 (from 299,000 to 326,000) by 1968.¹³ In February 1960 the government Actuary, analysing rising fertility and marriage rates, concluded the school roll of the late 1960s might be 10 per cent higher than previously thought.¹⁴

The government had been hoping that smaller class sizes could eventually be achieved with the same number of teachers when the post-war 'bulge'

passed. In the late 1950s it assumed that officially defined large classes – of over 30 pupils in secondaries and 40 in primaries – could be eliminated by 1970. The National Advisory Council had even advised the government that it could safely lengthen the training period from two to three years in 1960.¹⁵ This delay made a grim situation worse, and it became even more unpromising in 1960, when the Minister of Education, David Eccles, was advised that to meet class size targets he would need to add a further 4000 places to the extra 16,000 the Ministry had wrung out of the Treasury in 1959. Cabinet refused this request, and Eccles was left (having threatened resignation) merely to promise more training places at some unspecified time in the future.¹⁶

Eccles had to make do with a series of *ad hoc* measures, including a publicity campaign to attract married women back to teaching, and a ‘year of intermission conference’ to advise training colleges on how to use their existing facilities to train more students.¹⁷ Yet another round of Ministry bids ran into still more Treasury opposition into 1962. Otto Clarke, for instance, objected to the level of ‘wastage’ due to teachers leaving the profession to marry or have children: ‘of every 100 woman entrants ... only 40 will be there after five years’. ‘We are pouring water into a leaky bucket,’ he concluded.¹⁸ Daunted by these differences of opinion, and the complex choices before them, the Cabinet deferred any decision on expanding teacher training.¹⁹ The new Education Secretary, Edward Boyle, decided in late 1962 to bid again for the new places, this time promising a simultaneous squeeze on training colleges’ current budgets. The Treasury was impressed that efficiency savings were now proposed, as well as being worried that, if it frustrated the Ministry, the students in question would go to more expensive universities. It therefore agreed to Boyle’s requests.²⁰

Estimates of future pupil numbers now reached their zenith, and in this situation the Department was involved in an ever more desperate emergency action to increase their output of new teachers. In 1965, the National Advisory Council once again raised their advice on the number of places required in teacher training colleges from 111,000 to 120,000, leaving the standing promise of the previous government far behind at 80,000. The cost of such an expansion, estimated by the Treasury at £45m on buildings alone, seemed prohibitive, but as Crosland, by now Education Secretary, told the Cabinet, ‘I can hold the position [on class sizes] only if I can show that we are not going to do worse than our predecessors.’ Education was therefore able, once again, to win a large increase in the places apportioned to the colleges for 1973–74, increasing their numbers to 110,000, though it had to promise efficiency measures in this sector.²¹ Crosland met his efficiency targets with a ‘fourteen point plan’ announced in April 1965. This centred on a concentrated four-term year to increase the use of facilities and speed up the course. Longer hours, temporary training courses, bigger classes and new refresher courses were also used.²² Of the 150 Colleges of Education,

48 met or exceeded the Department's target of a 20 per cent increase in output through savings: St Mary's in south-west London's Strawberry Hill, for instance, extended its working day by one and a half hours for four days a week. This efficiency drive, which the recently renamed Department of Education and Science (DES) estimated saved £2m a year, impressed the Treasury, which by now accepted many of the DES demands on teacher training.²³

By 1969 the DES was relatively optimistic. Though shortages would remain for nearly a decade, they were at least able to project some teacher surpluses by 1978, and a large and sustained drop in class sizes.²⁴ However, it should be noted that even these estimates did not close the early 1970s 'teaching gap', and would only hold good if no other policy changed: throughout the 1960s, the government was still short of the teachers it would need in the short or medium term if it wanted to develop nursery education, or lower the primary school class size target from 40 to 30.²⁵ As elsewhere, though, there was also an ironic end to this story. The 1970s saw a massive deflation of the number of future pupils as birth rates sank. By the early 1980s, governments were reducing the teacher training provision so painstakingly built up to 110,000: in 1980–81, 28,000 places were cut.²⁶ In this field, at least, population forecasts were invalidated by the passage of time.

The 1960s also witnessed an explosion in the number of pressure groups and the extent of media concern about education – a third, and politically most explosive, source of discontent. The best example of this pressure was the 1963 Campaign for Education, which began as a National Union of Teachers protest but spread rapidly until it encompassed major educational bodies, trade unions, and civic and women's groups.²⁷ The Campaign called for £500m to be spent to bring all schools up to the Ministry's own standards, and the Campaign's newspaper condemned the 'moral crime committed in the condemnation of so many children to a second-class education'.²⁸ The Campaign declared 1964 a 'year for education', with regional meetings and hustings, and ending with a mass rally at the Albert Hall to cap November's 'education week'. This all attracted a good deal of press interest – and a Prime Ministerial enquiry as to their motivation.²⁹

The campaigners were vindicated by contemporary surveys of school buildings. Civil servants were preparing such a study in the summer of 1961, so as to estimate their building priorities for the medium term under the new 'Plowden' system of long-term expenditure provision. Even so, they envisaged only a quick and limited piece of work, testing conditions in the few 'representative' local authorities before moving on to work out what rebuilding and remodelling would cost based on their own cash building limits. The mounting political pressure now caused Whitehall to look again at the problem. As welfare spending now looked likely to rise in years to come, the Ministry was also determined not to be left out: as Eccles told his officials, he was at a 'disadvantage' in Cabinet because 'the Minister of

Housing ... supported his argument by detailed figures of the sub-standard houses that ought to be replaced ... I had no figures to quote about slum schools'. When they came to look at their so-called Black List, officials found only 'an ancient collection of bits of paper whose provenance and reliability are obscure in the extreme'. It was clear that they would have to start again.³⁰

The results of their efforts, conducted by means of a questionnaire sent to local authorities, were ready in draft form by the following February. The information was not released to the public, however, for the picture that emerged was one of dilapidation, backwardness and squalor. They were so bad, as Table 9.1 makes clear, that Dame Mary Smieton, the Permanent Secretary at Education, did not think it would be worth even asking the Treasury to help put them right. Boyle told Macmillan that the School Survey was 'a real "horror"', and some Education officials admitted that more than £1bn would be needed to make good the deficiencies. Although the secondary school building drive of the 1950s had modernised much of that sector, more than half of England and Wales' primary school children went to schools with no inside toilets; just under a fifth had no hall for assemblies or dining; 16.5 per cent were without warm water; more than a third were on a cramped or crowded site the Ministry itself considered 'sub-standard'.³¹

Delay and secrecy did not do the government much good, for the NUT had commissioned a parallel survey in two-thirds of the schools in England

Table 9.1 The School Building Survey, England and Wales, 1963

	<i>Primary schools</i>	<i>% of pupils in these schools</i>	<i>Secondary schools</i>	<i>% of pupils in these schools</i>
No warm water	6101	16.5	373	5
Sanitation mainly outdoors	15,441	57	1831	25.8
No central heating	5815	12.2	99	1
No electricity	202	0.3	0	0
No kitchens	4647	16.3	491	6
No staffroom	8750	18.5	95	0.9
50%+ in temporary buildings	564	3.0	178	2.6
School on more than one site	1673	9.6	921	16.1
'Seriously sub-standard' site	9211	34.2	1553	22.3
No hall	4073	19.4	389	4.7
Dining in classrooms	2288	11.1	286	3.9
<i>Schools with 1+ such features</i>	<i>18,406</i>	<i>69.8</i>	<i>2902</i>	<i>43.8</i>

Source: NAUK ED 150/146, School Building Survey, September 1963.

Table 9.2 Secondary modern schools, various characteristics, England and Wales, 1963

<i>Characteristic of school</i>	<i>% schools</i>
Pre-1914 buildings	40
10% or more classes 30+ pupils	47
No specialist foreign language teacher	57
No specialist special needs teacher	70
No specialist commercial subjects teacher	73
No specialist engineering teacher	93
No gymnasium	45
No library	28
No science laboratory	6

Source: National Union of Teachers, *The State of our Schools*, London, NUT, 1963, tables 1, 4, 6, 11, pp. 11–13, 15.

and Wales (see Table 9.2). As the government's own survey had shown, primary schools were in the worst state. Only 28 per cent of them had all their lavatories inside the main building; only 22 per cent had specialist rooms for all their activities, such as gymnasias, dining rooms and assembly halls. The lack of equity as between different types of school would also prove deeply embarrassing to the government. Some secondary moderns were in similar straits, and they had certainly been neglected on a much grander scale than grammars: only 11 per cent of heads were able to report that they had no specialist rooms appropriated for other uses, though about half had inside toilets.³²

The collapse of tripartism and the comprehensive revolution

Governments faced other acute problems, for the implicit 'tripartism' of the 1944 Education Act – under which pupils were judged suitable for a secondary modern, technical or grammar school education – began to crumble even before it was complete, a process that cut across party lines. Large American high schools and the perceived uniformity of the Soviet system – neither of which were thought to select at 11 – seemed, for a brief period, an attractive alternative to selection. Robin Pedley, Director of Exeter University's Institute of Education during the 1960s, who was one of the most influential propagandists for comprehensive education, wanted not only to bend Swedish research and action to British ends, but also to 'weld' together 'the Soviet insistence on raising the educational level of all' with 'America's concern for the freedom of the individual to move at his own best pace'.³³

Predictably, the main influence on children's progress was the attitude of their parents, and the atmosphere at home: one survey concluded that 'any

form of *nominally academic* selection will in effect be a form of *social selection*’.³⁴ J.W.B. Douglas’ books drew a similar moral. He found that parents’ expressed interest in education – across all social classes – was significantly related to their children’s test scores at 8 and 11. This gap was most acute at the level of basic verbal reasoning, reading and arithmetic, the key elements of both written tests and interviews for grammars.³⁵ Loss of talent *within* grammars was another key finding from academic research. Working-class leaving, highlighted in *Early Leaving*, a Central Advisory Committee report from 1954, was clearly going on at much higher rates than for other children. Even among those working-class children who did go to grammars, only a third managed to get three or more O Level passes.³⁶ According to teachers’ own assessments, 50 per cent of working-class children of ‘high ability’ left school at the minimum age in 1961–62, whereas only 10 per cent and 22 per cent respectively of the same children from the upper and lower middle classes did so.³⁷

Even more lethal to the credibility of the 11+ were doubts as to its accuracy even on its own terms. Work by the National Foundation for Educational Research in Middlesex found that verbal reasoning tests, which many LEAs used at 11+, did theoretically do rather well in predicting achievements in the first couple of years at the grammar. However, this still left an inevitable margin of error: they concluded that *any* system of rigid allocation would lead to ‘a considerably greater number of wrong allocations than can be viewed with equanimity’, with ‘10% of the children in any age-group, or about 60,000 children per year at present’ misallocated.³⁸ A British Psychological Society inquiry, published in 1957, similarly argued that it was ‘unlikely’ that this ‘wastage’ could be reduced below 10 per cent. ‘Complete accurate classification of children, either by level or type of ability, is not possible at 11 years,’ the author concluded.³⁹

Inside the Ministry, such evidence exacerbated latent doubts as to the efficacy of selection: one civil servant bemoaned the fact that ‘this country is pouring out its human wealth like water on the sands’.⁴⁰ By 1960 another official admitted that:

A system under which failure to win a place in a selective school at 11+ meant complete and irrevocable denial of the coveted opportunities associated with a grammar school education could not hope to win the support of parents, and could not survive the day when their wishes could gain a hearing. The very successes themselves which some of the new secondary schools recorded pointed the way to more ambitious aims for these schools.⁴¹

Ministers’ general reaction to this gathering sense of crisis was well expressed by the Education Minister, Geoffrey Lloyd, in 1957. He thought it might be enough to ‘soften the differences between schools with different labels’.⁴²

This policy was embodied in the December 1958 White Paper *Secondary Education For All*, which announced the government's desire that 'every Secondary school, no matter what its description, is able to provide a full Secondary education for each of its pupils in accordance with his ability and aptitude'.⁴³ Secondary moderns were encouraged to provide a range of courses, including O Level, technical and vocational courses. To this end a £300m five-year building programme was announced.⁴⁴

Although from the mid-1950s secondary moderns had been allowed to set O Levels for their pupils, very few of these schools did actually offer external examinations. This caused frustration and discontent at a time when parents were beginning to see qualifications as the key to their children's success: by 1959 a majority of voters wanted the 11+ abolished.⁴⁵ It also reinforced expert educationalists' case that Britain was under-investing in education and training, for opportunity seemed to be reserved for the academic elite. However, the Conservative government of the early 1960s did not wish to end selection. Though ministers were acutely aware of parental discontent with selection from at least the time of the 1955 election, all-ability schools were still seen as an experimental and local option, especially appropriate for rural areas.⁴⁶

Conservative Party worries about comprehensives were clear throughout the period: Lloyd had to address the party's backbench Education Committee in the spring of 1959 to allay their concerns after he agreed to the establishment of comprehensives in rural areas of Dorset.⁴⁷ That committee was inherently hostile to comprehensive schools, most of its members wanting 'to define the limits within which comprehensive schools were justified: for example, large catchment areas where only one new school was practicable'. Some were concerned that ministers were 'weakening' in their opposition to all-in schools, and worried away at themes that were to become familiar: comprehensives that were 'being run by the wrong people', over-large schools and the dangers to grammars.⁴⁸ Even Conservative MPs who wanted experimentation usually opposed the creation of new comprehensives; instead, they imagined transfer to secondary education at 13 rather than 11, for example, or an even greater degree of academic selection to avoid 'errors' on either side of the ability 'line'. Local Conservatives mounted increasingly angry campaigns in defence of grammars as Labour-run LEAs embarked on reorganisations.⁴⁹

If anything, Conservative opinion on selection hardened in the months before the 1964 election. Conservative Research Department officials thought that 'academically ... the [comprehensive] schools still have to prove themselves and until they have done so there would seem obvious risks in agreeing to the merging of established Grammar Schools in the pursuit of "desegregation"'.⁵⁰ Boyle therefore had to step carefully during his time in charge of Britain's schools. He himself had no faith left in the 11+, partly because he believed that it was leaving a large pool of ability

untapped, and to some extent because he 'would never dream of interfering with a local authority' that wanted to reorganise. Boyle was therefore content to go on 'quietly' allowing the abolition of selection through intelligence testing, though he was always careful to point out that he would not usually approve the actual destruction of grammar schools.⁵¹

Although many fully non-selective plans had been submitted by the time the Conservatives left office, few had therefore been approved. The years 1962–63 saw a number of reorganisation schemes submitted to the Ministry, mainly from Labour councils in northern cities, such as Manchester, Coventry and Sheffield.⁵² But the most high-profile experiment was in London, where over half the London County Council's (LCC) secondary school children were taught in schools that were called 'comprehensives', often established in new housing development areas. Still, only a handful of grammars had been closed. The LCC was proceeding cautiously, well aware that they could fall foul of Whitehall intervention. Florence Horsburgh, Conservative Education Minister in the early 1950s, had refused to integrate a local grammar with Kidbrooke Comprehensive in a *cause célèbre*. It took until 1963 for the LCC to announce the abolition of the 11+.⁵³

Labour's commitment to comprehensives went back to the 1930s. So central was this to Labour doctrine that *Learning to Live*, their 1958 policy statement, ran into opposition within the party since it concluded that 'it would not be possible within the period of a first Labour Government completely to abolish separation between schools'. The unpopularity of such opinions explained the much greater degree of radicalism evident in *Signposts for the Sixties* and Labour's 1964 manifesto, which vaguely but definitely promised comprehensivisation.⁵⁴ Labour ministers did their best to carry it out, against a background of ill-fitting buildings and lack of staff. The Cabinet's decision only to 'request' LEAs to submit plans abolishing the 11+ was partly due to the fact that comprehensivisation had 'to fit into the existing stock of school buildings'. Two-thirds of secondary schools had been built since the war, and replacement would inevitably be costly and 'very slow'. Many LEA programmes were committed as far ahead as 1968, making immediate reorganisation impossible.⁵⁵ Michael Stewart, Wilson's first Education Secretary who wanted to force LEAs to reorganise, had to accept defeat.⁵⁶

This led to the issuing of Circular 10/65 in July 1965, asking LEAs to submit comprehensive plans, a compromise that was later to come in for left-wing criticism. Several further steps, however, made it very difficult for recalcitrant LEAs to hold out. The most notable of these was Circular 10/66, issued in March 1966. This made clear that no more grammar schools would be approved, as 'the Secretary of State will not approve any new secondary projects ... which would be incompatible with the introduction of a non-selective system of secondary education'.⁵⁷ This made only a marginal difference, as there were few authorities seeking to build new grammars, but it did signal a final end to officially sanctioned tripartism. Just as important

was the fact that, when postponing the raising of the school leaving age, the DES was allowed to claw back £8m for special allocation to reorganisation in 1968–69, and £4m more for 1969–70 and 1970–71.⁵⁸

The longer they remained in power, the more powers Labour ministers were forced to take. Following massive Conservative victories over Labour in the 1968 local elections, Alice Bacon as Minister of State promised legislation to an impatient Labour conference both that year and the next.⁵⁹ Ted Short, having by this time replaced Crosland as Secretary of State for Education, realised that ‘the process of planning had lost momentum and that a hard core of LEAs and ... voluntary schools would hold out against government policy’. He therefore asked the Cabinet to approve a new Act, which would provide him with powers to force LEAs to submit plans on the basis that pupils of any ability could enter all schools.⁶⁰ LEAs would have had the legal duty to submit plans on a basis similar to Circular 10/65. Clause 1 of the Bill ruled out ‘selection by ability or aptitude’, despite Wilson’s wishes that the legislation should seem to be framed, not against grammars, but against the 11+ itself.⁶¹ Total comprehensivisation had not been achieved by 1970, but Labour had achieved many of its objectives. Seven per cent of English and Welsh children went to comprehensives in 1964; it was one-third by 1970. The figures in Scotland were one-quarter, rising to a half.⁶² Ministers successfully relied on the fact that, although they did not have the capacity to direct reorganisation themselves, they at least possessed the power of veto. By 1970 129 out of the 162 British LEAs had got the go-ahead to carry out their plans; 11 had been sent back as unacceptable; only 5 had refused to submit any plans at all.⁶³ As it was put into operation in the early 1970s, reorganisation even outlived Margaret Thatcher’s appointment as Education Secretary. She was left with little choice but to approve most of them, and by the mid-1970s comprehensives were the majority experience in British education.⁶⁴

The comprehensive revolution was, nevertheless, often ‘botched-up ... from the start’, as Short later argued in an attempt to blame Crosland for its ill-assorted mix of buildings. In the late 1960s about a quarter of all comprehensive schools were on split sites, occupying the buildings of what had once been two schools, and that figure fell only very slowly. Even by 1976 a fifth of secondary schools were on divided premises, and the Labour government that came to power in 1974 had to allocate yet another tranche of special funding to help bring this situation to an end.⁶⁵ Despite its triumph as the means by which most British children were educated, comprehensivisation had illustrated the continuing virulence of party political ideology, as well as adding even further to the strains of planning a massive expansion in education provision overall. Though by 1964 few politicians in any party were willing to defend the 11+, a Conservative electoral victory in that year would clearly have meant the creation of far fewer comprehensives, and many more grammar schools would have survived. Policy was driven

throughout by the mismatch between ideologically driven party philosophies and the limited means at the British state's disposal; reorganisation – despite the amount of money and political capital that had been spent on it – therefore left behind a half-finished system that was still contentious, divided and ripe for a conservative reaction.

The Scandinavian influence in British education

Many educators imagined Sweden to be what Gunnar and Alva Myrdal, the Swedish husband-and-wife team of economist and social scientist, called a 'laboratorium' of progress. 'The young are the future,' Gunnar Myrdal declared: '[it is] youth's difficult privilege to think freely and presumptuously about that which belongs to the future.' Gunnar Myrdal published *An American Dilemma*, on race and prejudice in the USA, and drew on the American Progressives' work: he had spent the worst of the Depression in the USA as a Fellow of the Rockefeller Institute.⁶⁶ In *An American Dilemma*, he showed how much Scandinavian social democracy owed to American social science, as well as to the planning and administration of Roosevelt's experimental 'New Deal'. Myrdal, indeed, ended his study of discrimination and black exclusion with an extraordinarily confident assertion of the future of the social sciences. 'The social sciences in America', he wrote, 'are equipped to meet the demands of the post-war world ... The social engineering of the coming epoch will [prove] ... that "human nature" is changeable and that human deficiencies and unhappiness are, in large degree, preventable.'⁶⁷

Alva Myrdal's research ran along similar and complementary lines. She sat on the Social Democrats' School Commission, which reported in 1948. The Commission's recommendations were very clear, and they formed the blueprint for decades of reform. Though they took many years to bring to fruition, depending on further reports in the 1950s and 1960s, the general outlines were clear. There should be one curriculum; one school for all children; one nine-year programme, with a strong input both of citizenship and economic skills for all. There should be no false distinction between academic and vocational life, and there should be a strong role for the individual teacher and his or her skills, rather than centralising *diktats*.⁶⁸ The Myrdals' general influence, transmitted by the presence of countless Scandinavian educationalists throughout the international educational bureaucracy, as well as numerous universities and think tanks, stands as one proof of the importance of the institutional position of new ideas' 'carriers'.⁶⁹

Sweden had always pioneered educational research, embodied for instance in Carl Cederblad's work on the 'folk high schools' of adult education in the 1930s and 1940s. Torsten Husén had shown in the early 1950s that selective education for exams could *change* and *lift* measures of intelligence such as IQ, moulding and reinforcing social divisions rather than reflecting inherent ability. This insistence on both theory and data now became a

constant, and a pervasive, theme in writing about the 'Scandinavian model'. Particularly influential were findings of Husén, at the Stockholm School of Education, and his collaborators. Husén himself went on to become head of the UNESCO Institute in Hamburg, which later moved to Stockholm, and to chair expert conferences under the aegis of groups such as the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement.⁷⁰ His influence was as important in detail as it was in the rarefied world of international advice. Nils-Eric Svensson, in work suggested by Husén, his academic supervisor, grouped Stockholm's schools into three categories: those in which students would work in mixed-ability groupings for four, six or eight years. But 'in no instance could we note any distinct superiority for homogeneous or heterogeneous groups', he concluded. Any superiority the pupils in the early streaming schools may have brought over from their previous, more privileged education 'had been reduced to practical nullity by the time all pupils reached grade 8 and 9'.⁷¹ The comprehensive experiment, it seemed, could proceed without worrying about the effects of teaching very different pupils in the same class.

Other scholars buttressed the analysis. The Gothenberg 'youth project', which ran from 1948 with a sample size of more than 10,000 young people followed up every few years, backed up the idea that there was a 'reserve of ability' – itself originally a Swedish phrase – that could be uncovered in a more egalitarian system. This would be revealed once the surface layers of outward confidence and social standing had been stripped away, a function which selective education had not yet been able to perform. 'The results imply', wrote Allan Svensson in 1971, 'that pupils with a positive attitude towards higher education, and who claim to feel at home and confident in the school situation, succeed better in both Swedish and mathematics than their results on intelligence tests give reason to expect.'⁷² Those going into academic education were not necessarily the best and the brightest; it was advisable, therefore, to keep all options open throughout school careers. What was to be taught in those schools was also covered. The Swedish government's committee of inquiry made recommendations for the curriculum from 1957 to 1961, which were later included in the subsequent 1962 Education Act. In parallel with this, the Swedish Industrial Council for Social and Economic Studies, sponsored by industry and commerce in association with the trade unions, brought out reports on maths and Swedish (1960), physics and chemistry (1962), and civics (1965).⁷³

Sweden did not move immediately to a comprehensive system, and its government in fact managed a long period of transition between 1948 and, finally, 1970. In the interim, years of fruitful local research would provide the basis for moving forward. This gained in scale and importance as time went on. Originally 144 local authorities declared that they were ready to join these experiments, from which 14 were initially chosen. However, as the years passed, more and more councils joined. When the projects started

in the academic year 1949–50, 2483 pupils were included. By 1955–56 there were 84,941, and by 1961–62 436,595.⁷⁴

Pedley, for one, recommended exactly this approach for Britain. He provided the preface for one book by the head of Sweden's National Board for Education with a particularly strong statement of this approach. 'Sweden went ahead with a national plan', he wrote, 'while experiment in England was undirected and piecemeal ... Sweden's methodical approach enabled the familiar arguments to proceed alongside planned development.' 'Research in Sweden', he continued, 'has ... been most useful in helping to get the details of reorganisation right, and [establishing the] lines of development *inside* the comprehensive school.'⁷⁵ Maurice Kogan later put this succinctly in an interview with Edward Boyle, the Conservative Education Minister in the early 1960s who allowed experimentation with the comprehensive model. Boyle spent only two years in office, rather different according to Kogan from

Swedish social democratic educational planning, in which there were five years of research by Husén and the rest, then a five-year period in which they matched schools in Stockholm to see how comprehensivization worked, and then a change of law and then a ten-year plan concerted between the Royal Swedish Board of Education and the Ministry of Finance to get the thing off the ground. This was, in fact, a cycle of twenty years over which a major piece of social engineering was achieved.⁷⁶

Pedley praised Swedish comprehensives themselves in his Pelican Original, *The Comprehensive School*, in 1963. He acknowledged that many of the old Swedish *gymnasia* now educated young people from 15 to 19, making the reorganisation of the lower schools less of a problem than in England and Wales. Rather than some grammar schools being threatened with actual closure, as in Britain, the Swedes had simply shifted their role to cater for older children and young people. Still, it was an important part of his case that he could cite Husén and Svensson's work showing that 'children from poorer homes have responded most strongly to the superior advantages of the comprehensive school over the Swedish equivalent of the "modern" school; [so] there is nothing to be said for grouping together children of average and below-average capacity'.⁷⁷ John Vaizey took up the same theme, from the same evidence, in his 1962 Penguin Special *Britain in the Sixties: Education for Tomorrow*, though the details he gave were not precisely accurate:

In a carefully controlled experiment in which the city of Stockholm was divided into two, one half going over to the common school, while the other half remained divided into grammar schools and schools for children of lesser ability, the common schools have proved to be academically more successful with all groups of ability except, in the initial years,

with boys of high ability from the working class. Even this group has now caught up, and it seems probable that their original retardation was due to the reorganisation of the schools and the consequent disturbance of their academic careers.⁷⁸

The Swedes' influence was not limited to simply talking to their fellow academics. Anthony Crosland, the Labour Education Secretary responsible for issuing the administrative circular on which the comprehensive system was based, later remembered that 'we weren't starting completely *tabula rasa*. The Swedes had been going at it for some time, and I got Professor Husén to come to Curzon Street and talk to us all. He was wholly in favour of our pushing on as we were doing.'⁷⁹

It was not only comprehensives, and Sweden, that caught the imagination of British experts. Willis Dixon, Secretary of the University of London Institute of Education, also highlighted Norway's achievements. In particular, under their 1959 Education Act, the Norwegians had succeeded in greatly reducing the number of elementary pupils in single schools with only one or two different classes containing children of different ages. By 1963 the Norwegians had ensured that less than 1 per cent of pupils were in undivided schools, and only 11 per cent were taught in schools with four or fewer divisions. Norway was nearly as committed as Sweden to the single nine-year school, though the country came to that conclusion later in the 1950s; and Oslo encouraged local experimentation in much the same way Stockholm approached the problem. Works such as Dixon's *Society, Schools and Progress in Scandinavia*, published in 1965, brought these achievements to a British audience.⁸⁰

The idea of strong central direction gained hold in Britain during the early 1960s, especially among educationalists frustrated at the apparently slow rate of progress. The university sector felt this development most acutely. 'At the moment the universities receive their grants from the University Grants Committee, which is run by a handful of permanent staff,' Vaizey argued in 1962. 'We need a strong central council for planning,' he argued: 'Sweden, France, Holland and the USSR have such bodies.' Vaizey also thought that comprehensive schools would help to boost the numbers applying to university.⁸¹ The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), though relatively sceptical about Scandinavian economic policies, was also impressed with the quality and manner of Swedish educational planning. In its 1967 report on Swedish education, the OECD pointed out that in 1965 Swedish government departments had been encouraged to plan for the longer term. 'One of the results of this re-organisation', they pointed out, 'was the creation in every ministry of a new unit, the planning and budgetary secretariat.' Not only did the Ministry of Education have its own planning unit, but it also sat on the Educational Planning Council with the much-vaunted Labour Market Board, the Treasury, the universities, the

unions and the employers. This allowed all concerned to work on statistics for future policy, follow up expert commissions' recommendations, oversee the research for which Sweden was becoming famous and support 'horizontal' work that cut across apparently different policy areas. The OECD praised Sweden's 'rolling' reform process, since it was pragmatic, based on evidence, and capable of adjustment when circumstances or research demanded.⁸² Norway, too, as Dixon pointed out, had its own Council for Experiments in Schools.⁸³

Altogether, Sweden's influential adult education and training system, her comprehensive schools, universities and decision-making system made a formidable case for more research, centralisation and planning. Other Scandinavian countries played a much less important role in the British educational debate, except when any elements similar to the Swedish model were noted as implicit support for her experimental and egalitarian approach. Some educationalists even used that integrated system as a shorthand for the perceived triumph of the northern nations as a whole. 'The small size of population of each country may contribute to [a] feeling of intimacy, of "togetherness",' wrote Willis Dixon. Schools provided an introduction to 'a way of life which everyone, according to his means, his tastes and inclinations, can share with his neighbours'.⁸⁴

Though Scandinavian models were not always copied, and Britain for instance introduced comprehensives at very short notice compared to Sweden, the appeal and the model were nonetheless vital as signposts and exemplars of what could be achieved: as indicating, in short, the line of march. As Lewis Spolton, Lecturer in Education at University College, Swansea, put it in 1967:

In 20 years the framework of a new pattern has been carefully erected. From any point of view it is a formidable undertaking. But the Swedish policy-makers believe the pace of change is such that waiting for something to evolve is no longer possible; what is required is a national system geared to buttress economic growth.⁸⁵

That judgement flowed from Scandinavians' position at the heart of international advisory bodies, as well as their direct contacts with British politicians and civil service planners. Both allowed the 'carriers' of new ideas, Husén and the Myrdals among them, to spread their influence.

The search for efficiency gains in school building

There were narrower administrative and ideological aspects to the emphasis on central planning. The 1960s saw the Ministry of Education become increasingly frustrated by their lack of control, irritated by and sceptical about unresponsive local authorities. 'The education service', thought its

future Permanent Secretary Herbert Andrew, 'is like one of those prehistoric reptiles, the nervous system of which was so primitive that half the creature's tail could be chewed off before a message arrived to say that there was something wrong at the latter end.'⁸⁶ The early 1960s saw a number of what Boyle called 'exceptional able and powerful' civil servants promoted to the top of the Ministry – Toby Weaver and Antony Part, for instance, both Deputy Secretaries – and they were keen to take tighter control of the education world.⁸⁷

Efficiency gains were also at the heart of planning's appeal in education, especially when it came to school building. The main part of the education budget that the Ministry could actually control – building costs – therefore came under close scrutiny throughout this period, as Whitehall's only means of steering the education service as a whole. Although central government had laid down building standards for schools since 1905, it took until after the Second World War before it actually started intervening on building costs. Following the creation of a Development Group within the Ministry in 1948, and the imposition of cost per place limits in 1949 that were tightened in 1951 and 1954, central government did at least possess levers to control capital expenditure, for LEAs had to apply for permission to erect new buildings, or to adapt old buildings to new uses. The Ministry was forced into a search for new and more 'efficient' procedures it could direct from the centre. They found them in the technocratic idea of scientific modernisation, at a time when continental Modernists such as Ernö Goldfinger and Carl Franck were working on new, open and 'light' new schools in London and elsewhere.⁸⁸

There was an administrative reason for this too, for officials were highly impressed by the advances made by LEAs building anew while remaining subject to cost controls. Key to this progress was a move away from the so-called 'corridor' or 'finger plan' schools of the 1930s and 1940s, which had many wings radiating from a central core, and external walls with huge glass windows, and which could be very expensive. It was hoped that new schools would be cheaper, while allowing teachers to break classes up into small clusters and groups. This last ability was also attractive at a time when personalised teaching methods were becoming fashionable.⁸⁹ Another central component of the whole programme was the prefabrication of parts, and the idea of a building grid into which the parts could be fitted. This became known as the 'Hertfordshire model' since several influential officials from that County Council, for instance Stirrat Johnson-Marshall, joined the Ministry in the 1940s and 1950s.⁹⁰ The Development Group promoted a number of systems, including Intergrid, based on interlocking steel beams and 'light and dry' pre-stressed concrete panels. The whole package was supposed to be adaptable, economical on labour and quick to build.⁹¹

This emphasis on technical progress and standardisation led in turn to the birth of local authority consortia, which attempted to reduce costs by

pooling expertise and orders. The most famous of these was the Consortium of Local Authorities Special Project, or CLASP. This began in 1957, led by Nottinghamshire County Council under Donald Gibson as County Architect. Gibson had been Coventry's City Architect during the war, and had drawn up a series of ambitious rebuilding plans for that city. CLASP schools were originally designed to deal with mining subsidence by building around a diagonal steel frame that would move with the ground beneath it, though it did not take long for architects to realise that CLASP might have more general uses.⁹² The Ministry under Lord Hailsham had already been considering just how to achieve what he called 'the mass production of schools', and 'getting eleven for the price of ten'; the fact that 'one county architect has shown the initiative' was extremely welcome at a time when the Ministry was becoming frustrated with LEAs' tardiness. Officials hastily convened a conference in Nottingham itself, during which they urged LEAs to band together in the name of efficiency and cost savings. Hailsham promised at that conference that they would be able to keep the savings they made to spend elsewhere, a 'concession' that was later narrowed to apply only to that amount of money that councils saved on measures against subsidence.⁹³

This zeal for experimentation, and new methods, extended to foreign as well as domestic examples. Britain's Ministry of Education issued one of its *Design Notes* on Swedish school building in 1968. A mixed team of civil servants, architects, Her Majesty's Inspectors and local authority officials visited that country in November 1967, and spent a week studying Swedish methods. A day with the Swedish Ministry's chief planners and architects was followed by visits to a wide range of new schools and community buildings. Though their enthusiasm was restrained, the planners were clearly impressed with the provisions for both younger and older pupils. Primary school pupils were often taught via the new 'open plan' methods, with 'informal arrangements of tables, plenty of space, and generous opportunities for display'. Older pupils' buildings were being assessed by a characteristic set of pilot projects, about which the Ministry was as enthusiastic as the OECD; 87 unitary 'comprehensive' schools were being assessed to see how different modes of mixed-ability teaching could be supported by architectural means. The visiting team were shown one video which showed 'a school project based on glass' in which 'the pupils were seen working in small groups, each one assigned to a particular aspect of the study'. The light and movement allowed by the glass and steel buildings facilitated this type of work.⁹⁴

The methods adopted by the consortia represented a move away from the older systems, such as Integrid, the rights to which were owned by their manufacturers. They were supposed to be flexible, dispensing with heavy concrete panelling through the extensive use of panels, tiling and glass units that would fit together around a steel frame. The cladding utilised in prefabricated schools had already begun to look tired, and the new methods

would answer architects' and designers' complaints about rigid system building by giving them increased control over schools' final shape. The Nottingham innovations came at a time when architects were looking for a 'rationalised traditional' compromise between old and new techniques.⁹⁵ The Ministry seized on the new idea, encouraging LEAs to join consortia as soon as possible. Their exhortations led to the creation of SCOLA – the Second Consortium of Local Authorities – in 1961; the Development Group published a *Building Bulletin* on the topic in June 1961. In February 1964, LEAs were asked to make 'wider use of industrialised methods of building', and informed of the creation of an information centre on this subject in the Ministry.⁹⁶ This Productivity Group compiled a list of prefabricated parts, worked on 'collation and analysis of site labour records' and produced guides to the consortia. The Ministry's Building Intelligence Team was then reorganised to focus on statistics, and to aid the Productivity Group in its 'urgent need to collect data, even basic data, on the expenditure of site manpower on educational building'. LEAs were now going to be asked for cost information at every stage of building, rather than the quarterly manpower totals that they had previously been asked to submit.⁹⁷

Building planning was brought to a new pitch in the later 1960s. During 1964 and 1965, the Architects and Building Branch began to gather detailed information as to which LEAs could actually meet their targets, inevitably encouraging the quicker industrialised building methods by so doing. Direct pressure was put on councils that had not yet joined building consortia, pointing out that they could work directly with building contractors' proprietary building systems, under advice from the Department.⁹⁸ By 1970 there were eight consortia in operation, with most LEAs having joined one of the groupings, and half of all schools were built using their techniques. Detailed technical work continued to widen the range of standardised components on which all LEAs could draw, and the DES encouraged the establishment of LEAs' own Development Groups. Such measures brought industrialised building of schools to their late 1960s highs.⁹⁹

The Ministry of Education's *Building Bulletin* on this subject made great play of the fact that consortium building would allow councils to hold their school building costs down as against the national average. Concrete cladding, lights, doors and windows all seemed to cost less under CLASP; and per square foot of teaching space provided, the system was presented as being cheaper than other methods. However, the *Bulletin* only contained estimates for the most successful and experienced county, Nottinghamshire. No comprehensive sample was attempted, and it therefore remained quite possible that costs might not be brought down through consortia building.¹⁰⁰ This was no accident, for the Ministry was reliant for its figures on reports issued by the consortium itself. What information they did gather privately seems actually to have shown that all CLASP secondary schools were not, on average, much cheaper than the national average, though

smaller and simpler primary schools were indeed less costly.¹⁰¹ Once again, the intellectual framework that underpinned this building boom began to look dangerously fragile.

The consortium movement was later to come under considerable scrutiny, and popularly to be seen as another failure of the search for 'scientific', futuristic and modernist solutions. Steel-and-glass schools such as Hunstanton in Norfolk, designed by the modernists Alison and Peter Smithson, were later denounced by one of their heads as 'a bit of a nightmare because the building is too cold in winter, hot in summer, the interior is too noisy and open and creates teaching difficulties'.¹⁰² Consortium architects unfortunately shared the more general fashion for keeping the component parts of buildings 'fully expressed', drawing attention to the discrete shapes of joints, window fittings, panels and doors: this 'legibility' would look extremely crude and clumsy once the parts started to age. Worse than this, few of the new type of schools were free from the acoustic problems inherent in providing larger spaces for 'flexibility' and overlapping uses. Many of them were expensive and complex to heat given their lightweight exteriors. Some LEAs, overwhelmed by the scale of building that they were being asked to do, used consortia plans and parts, not to give themselves flexibility, but to build identikit schools that were not well adapted to their particular environments.¹⁰³ Public taste turned against the new methods, while two fires in CLASP buildings, one in a school just outside Paris in 1973, and one in an old people's home in Nottinghamshire in 1974, helped to bring the consortia further into disrepute.¹⁰⁴

Many of the apparent cost gains might also have been nothing to do with the new building techniques employed. Large building firms complained that they could achieve even greater cost savings had they access to a programme that was as large as CLASP. Though a CLASP school won the Special Grand Prize at the Triennale di Milano in 1961, many of the parts had been lent by the same manufacturers who thereafter found their systems pushed out of the market.¹⁰⁵ There was certainly little actual research on comparative building costs until the Ministry started advocating consortia building; there was also no way of knowing what long-term maintenance expenditure would be. Traditional building costs were also brought down by the labour-saving methods of the new groups, and a mix of comparative and experimental styles may have paid off. Instead, the Ministry's propaganda usually threw its weight behind this one model.¹⁰⁶ This does not seem to have accelerated building sufficiently to relieve the economic strain of the massive school-building programme. As the Ministry's architects noted in 1966, this was a plan 'of unprecedented difficulty, particularly as progress ... is lagging well behind the target rates'.¹⁰⁷

On the other hand, there is no systematic evidence that the new consortium architecture was any more expensive to maintain, or that the leaky roofs, rotting windows or vandalism of the 1980s were any more prevalent

than in traditionally built schools. Much more important in any decline in school quality may have been central government's own cost limits, which failed to keep up with inflation from the time of their inception in 1949.¹⁰⁸ There were crucial differences between the proprietary heavy concrete systems that local authorities used for housing, and the 'light and dry' systems adopted by LEAs that had nearly two decades' experience of developing novel construction techniques for educational buildings: new schools' physical problems would never reach the depths or extent evident in the premature obsolescence of some public housing. Without the consortia, large building companies would probably have built many more prefabricated schools that were even more reliant on flat roofs, and glass and steel, than were the public sector alternatives.¹⁰⁹

Conclusions: unrewarded advances?

Faced with demographic crises, tested by popular and political demands, inspired and worried in turns by Scandinavian and other examples, and attempting to build on Britain's strength in high-prestige scientific and technological projects, successive governments expanded education provision as fast as they possibly could. There were some great achievements, all the more impressive given the scale of the challenge. Class sizes continued to fall; teacher training numbers expanded very rapidly to cope with rising pupil rolls; many more children stayed on at school. In Britain as a whole, there were 85,000 more teachers at the end of the 1960s alone than there had been at the start of that decade; in England and Wales alone, there were over 6000 new schools and 600,000 more places in further education.¹¹⁰

The building programme was managed more effectively than the contemporaneous housing drive, since local authorities were more experienced at building schools, the central Development Group had a longer history, and the aesthetics of 'light and dry' school building fitted into popular perceptions of what schools should look like more effectively than systems-built dwellings resembled voters' image of desirable housing. Planners also got nearer their objectives than they had in housing, a fact that was recognised by the public. By the late 1960s, education was one of the few areas in which a significant proportion of the electorate thought that Labour was doing a good job, even at the nadir of their popularity in 1968–69. They remained ahead of the Conservatives on this issue, as 63 per cent of the electorate continued to think that the education service was 'good value for money'.¹¹¹

Educational planners did take some false steps during the 1960s. The machinery of central control only had any real purchase on certain well-defined areas, for instance school building, and it should be no surprise that it was in these fields that many of the more successful initiatives were mounted. The ideologically motivated switch from secondary selection to comprehensivisation stretched even this system, as did the delay in raising

the school leaving age and the subsequent adoption of 'educational priority' as one means by which educational opportunity could be expanded. Outside this narrow compass of control, governments' ability to assert their will was even more limited. Divisions between departments, and a lack of rapid intelligence and statistics, were additional problems that made the situation even worse. Tested to its limits by the rapid pace of reform on all fronts, the educational bureaucracy struggled to keep up.

This was very clear when it came to deciding between different educational priorities – one of the key reasons why both expert and public views of the system never quite testified to its advance. It was far from obvious, in this respect, that comprehensivisation, the inception of new school building techniques or the creation of novel financial controls had allowed Whitehall and Westminster to keep up with the public's increasing and often incompatible demands on the system. Emphasising free entry to academic grammar schools, and struggling to boost the role of secondary moderns, had served not to create a grateful public, but simply to build up more and more demand for better schooling among those locked out of the former. The reorganisation of secondary education was thereafter very vulnerable to public scepticism, scandal and the self-same revolution in parental aspirations that had led to their creation in the first place.

Administrative overstretch similarly made itself felt in the lack of links with wider economic policy, for by the late 1960s and early 1970s evidence was emerging that it was not Britain's schools *per se* that were holding her back, but the use of what highly skilled manpower there was in military or high-prestige projects, as well as the paucity of general and managerial skills in the middle ranks.¹¹² The outdated apprenticeship system that trapped most working people in specific and declining industries was another key problem.¹¹³ To address this, industrial, educational and training policy would have had to be brought together, as some contemporary economists of education recommended, but this proved beyond governments' capacity. Overall, the education service itself reacted well to some formidable problems, but parents who joined groups such as the Campaign for Education remained far from convinced of those objective 'victories'.

10

Slum Schools, Civil Servants and Sociology: Educational Priority Areas, 1967–72

The Plowden Report in context

In 1963, Edward Boyle appointed Lady Bridget Plowden to look into the state and future of primary education, reputedly having been impressed while he sat next to her at a dinner party.¹ There were far deeper reasons behind the appointment, which mirrored the commissioning of the Schools Survey: the growing clamour around the idea of education as both an efficient use of public money and as one effective way of creating a more equal society, and the nagging fear that British children were being ill-served by their schools. The final Plowden Report of October 1966 was one of the most far-reaching reports ever submitted to the Ministry of Education, and one that in considering schools in poorer urban areas issued a famous rallying call to reform:

We have ... seen schools caught in ... vicious circles and read accounts of many more ... We noted the grim approaches; incessant traffic noise in narrow streets; parked vehicles hemming in the pavement; rubbish dumps on waste land nearby; the absence of green playing spaces ...; tiny play grounds; gaunt looking buildings; often poor decorative conditions inside; narrow passages; dark rooms; unheated and cramped cloakrooms; unroofed outside lavatories; tiny staff rooms; inadequate storage space ...; inadequate space for movement and for PE; meals in classrooms; art on desks; music only to the discomfort of others in an echoing building ... insufficient display space; attractive books kept unseen in cupboards for lack of space to lay them out ... sometimes all around, the ingrained grime of generations.²

Successive governments' drive in the field of secondary education, the expansion of the universities after the 1963 Robbins Report and the long debates about selection and comprehensivisation meant that the British had come rather late to the subject of primary education. Sir John Newsom's

1963 report, *Half Our Future*, had taken a long look at the physical surroundings and problems (the so-called ‘schools in slums’) endured by the ‘below average’ secondary pupil. But much less work had been conducted on the situation among under-11s.³ That situation was now reversed, and politicians and officials would spend many years attempting to construct a new system of early years’ care that would help to counter disadvantage cast much more widely than just segregation by social class.⁴ Given the rising birth rate, there was an enormous gap in such provision, a need often met by a new nursery school movement at grass-roots level. Of the 250,000 British children under five in 1969, only 25,000 went to state nursery schools or classes, and a further 100,000 attended voluntary nurseries created by the pre-school movement.⁵ Examples of these voluntary groups abounded. The Race Relations Committee of the Society of Friends, for instance, bought a large Victorian house in Lonsdale Square in Islington for this purpose during 1967. Within two years two classes of English, Irish, Cypriot, Turkish, African and West Indian children were regularly being supervised there. The Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) then sponsored a playgroup leaders’ course in the house.⁶

‘Plowden’, as her committee’s report inevitably became known, famously recommended that ‘as a matter of national policy, “positive discrimination” should favour schools in neighbourhoods where children are most severely handicapped by home conditions’. Teachers should be paid £120 extra in these areas; no class there should be more than 30 strong; £5000 more should be apportioned per school for minor building works; new links with Colleges of Education should be established to test out new ways of working with children; and innovative ‘Community Schools’ should be ‘tried out first in priority areas’.⁷ The report generally got an extremely favourable press. Even the usually restrained *Economist* dubbed the report ‘so right and so radical that no realist would expect much progress to be made with it’ – a prescient remark.⁸

Community schools, bringing in parents and teachers for evening sessions on a range of subjects both concerning the children’s day education and the parents’ own interests, would become a particular matter of both fascination and controversy.⁹ The idea quickly became extremely ambitious, summed up by the Schools Council in private as ‘linking neighbourhood interests, further education (including youth work), leisure activities and school, in the closest possible way’. New neighbourhood centres would house school activities, but also a crèche, health and social services, youth sports centres and provision for adult learning.¹⁰ These were in the end deeply liberal, integrative, optimistic and perhaps Victorian concepts, echoing the economist Alfred Marshall’s late nineteenth-century concept of a more educated, involved and skilled working class liberated by technology, knowledge and learned self-restraint. But Marshall’s ideal – and the implicit concept behind many more ‘moderate’ Educational Priority Area (EPA) advocates – was that

working people would become more *middle class* and 'achieve' more. They would possess and accrue 'worthwhile knowledge'.¹¹ This would become one key problem for the programme.

In the long run, the idea of 'social compensation' represented Westminster and Whitehall's reaction to the rise of social work, both as a profession and as a concept. Central government, and the Labour Party, perceived social work to be a relatively cheap way of fighting crime and social 'dysfunction'; Frederic Seebom's contemporaneous official Report into the Social Services spoke glowingly of the field; local authorities were amenable to the idea of expanding their work with 'problem' families.¹² But this precise wave of urban interventionism was also due to a more pressing political crisis relating to immigration. There were 131,000 immigrant children in Britain's schools in 1966, and 264,000 by 1970. This phenomenon was highly concentrated in London and the West Midlands: 17 per cent of the early 1970s roll in ILEA schools was made up of immigrant children, and 14 per cent in Wolverhampton.¹³ Councils such as Wolverhampton pleaded for assistance with the 'inflow'.¹⁴ A stream of unpleasant, overtly racist letters arrived in ministers' offices complaining about the presence and concentration of immigrant children. They reached a crescendo following Enoch Powell's notorious 'rivers of blood' speech in April 1968.¹⁵

The Education Department had an unfortunate history on this issue, for a 1965 Circular had advised LEAs to 'disperse' a 'surplus' of immigrants to other schools once they made up 30 per cent of any school roll. This insensitive and divisive policy, born out of a desire to reduce the perceived extra 'load' on any one school, ran into sustained opposition from the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination, the National Council for Civil Liberties, and the Greater London Council (GLC) and ILEA, which decided to ignore the Secretary of State's advice.¹⁶ Labour was also embarrassed by its decision in office to further tighten administration of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962, which they had criticised while in Opposition.¹⁷ Clearly some more sensitive, progressive and constructive policy was needed to deal with the extra resources required for teaching English as a second language, for instance. Plowden provided a way of doing just this.

The influence of immigration was evident in two more novel funding streams for education – the Urban Programme and the Community Development Programme (CDP), which paid for over 18,000 extra nursery places in the late 1960s and early 1970s.¹⁸ Education was the single biggest recipient of this aid, taking 20 per cent of all Urban Programme projects in the first nine 'phases' of its operation.¹⁹ Wilson's May 1968 speech announcing the Urban Programme came just five days after Powell's incendiary intervention, and the Prime Minister deliberately gave the speech in Birmingham, the site of Powell's own talk.²⁰ The Cabinet agreed about £30m for the Programme over three years: 'it was agreed that particular attention should be paid to improving educational facilities, since elsewhere

than in the Midlands there seemed to be no clear correlation between the presence of large numbers of immigrants and a shortage of housing'.²¹ One criterion for qualification was that more than 6 per cent of children on the school roll were from immigrant communities.²² Just under £9m in aid was distributed in all, leading to local councils' spending around £60m on such projects.²³

Worries about the local effect of immigration, and the conditions in which some immigrants were forced to live, were also to the fore in the government's announcement in 1969 on CDPs. These were an 'action-research' initiative managed by the Oxford sociologist A.H. 'Chelly' Halsey, which tried to bring together inter-service teams to deliver inner-city welfare, and research the best methods for doing so at the same time. It was an idea inextricably bound up with both the rise of social work and worries about New Commonwealth newcomers, even if the very first CDP areas contained few of the latter.²⁴ Suggestively, CDP emerged not from local government, but the much more punitive Home Office and the fertile imagination of Derek Morrell, a civil servant whom Crossman dubbed 'a man of quite unusual administrative drive combined with a mystical imagination'.²⁵ His Working Party specifically appended their report to a wider policy brief on 'Immigration and Community Relations' and, although immigrant numbers were not a specific criterion for inclusion, CDPs were aimed at 'the inclusion of minority groups within the general community, sharing in the responsibilities as well as the benefits of such membership'.²⁶ One of the reasons immigrant numbers were not singled out was that the Home Office believed that this was hardly worth it, for 'the existence of a sizeable problem with immigrant families is one of the more obvious features of some possible CDA[reas]'.²⁷

The other most pressing reason why governments turned to selective spending was the financial situation. An extra £16m of focused spending over three years, announced in July 1967 as spending cuts began to bite, provided at least some relief in this context.²⁸ We have already noted that the raising of the school leaving age, an unambiguous manifesto pledge in both 1964 and 1966, was delayed in the January 1968 cuts package.²⁹ But ministers' decision to put back the date of this reform brought forth a torrent of complaint from the Labour Party, and the Prime Minister's own correspondence filled with complaints from Constituency Labour Parties and the wider public.³⁰ All the more reason, then, to preserve this eye-catching initiative on the education front and to protect poorer families from spending reductions, as ministers argued during Parliamentary debates on the cuts.³¹ Educationalists, for their part, termed any idea of such a mechanistic *quid pro quo* 'silly', and most of Plowden's original authors issued a statement deploring it.³² The idea's contingent birth, dependent on fears about the governance of immigration and the ongoing crisis of external economic policy, boded ill for the concept's ultimate acceptance.

The American exemplar: war on poverty and 'head start'

A certain idea of American liberalism was another key driver behind these reforms. The War on Poverty's action programmes usually contained an element of 'research by doing', treating each intervention as a social research laboratory.³³ Further back, the German-born psychologist Kurt Lewin had pioneered such techniques in US industry during the 1930s, before his pupil Martin Deutsch adapted the technique to educational work with urban black children in the early 1960s.³⁴ A long, though rather sceptical, paper on 'American experience of community projects' was submitted to the CDP Working Party in February 1968.³⁵ The Plowden Committee itself visited the USA for two weeks, and its official Working Parties considered a number of official and Ford Foundation working papers on Head Start and the War on Poverty.³⁶

The consumer activist and social entrepreneur Michael Young, famous for his work with the Institute of Community Studies and as the founder of the Advisory Committee for Education and the Consumer Association, was a member of the committee. It was he who constructed the whole idea of EPAs, though some of his more radical suggestions were rejected.³⁷ He followed the idea up himself by co-authoring *Learning Begins at Home*, part research report and part manual for teachers and parents, which described attempts to get parents involved in a single school's transformation.³⁸ Young also played a central role in discussions about 'Plowden' at the many meetings Crosland organised in his own home, and in a long correspondence with the Secretary of State.³⁹ His passionate interest in, and concern about, familial influences in education helped to bridge the gap between the emphasis on 'community' in empirical British sociology and more theoretical, quantitative American approaches that focused on urbanity and race.⁴⁰ He told Halsey he had been 'impressed with what I saw ... on my trip around the USA for Plowden ... I tied it up in a parcel and thought of the label "Educational Priority Areas"'.⁴¹

Young's American inspiration was instructive. British educationalists, for instance Susan Isaacs and the Nursery School Association with which she was involved between the wars, had long taken a pragmatic interest in 'encouraging' very young children to embrace new experiences on a 'trial and error' basis.⁴² But it was in the United States, for instance in the work of the psychologist Joseph McVicker Hunt, that the intellectual concept of early stimulation was to be systematised. Building anew on the work of Jean Piaget, Hunt himself argued that there was actually no such thing as fixed and predetermined intelligence, but rather a personality formed out of the constant interplay between child and environment. The idea of 'letting children be' while they developed, accepted for so long in the context of inevitable and fixed outcomes, was therefore 'highly unfortunate' on both counts. Instead 'it might be feasible to discover ways to govern the

encounters that children have with their environment, especially during the early years of their development, to achieve a substantially higher adult level of intellectual capacity'.⁴³ The concept became pervasive. Even highly conservative and controversial American psychologists who focused on inherited differences, such as Arthur Jensen of Berkeley, accepted that children's complex innate dispensations *might* justify reshaping their learning environments. As Jensen put it, 'the differences that remain are a challenge for public education ... [this] will be met by making available more ways and means for children to benefit from schooling'.⁴⁴

Hunt's position was much more influential among the proponents of interventionist education programmes in the early 1960s. It was during this period that the University of Chicago educationalists Benjamin Bloom, Allison Davis and Robert Hess refined such inchoate ideas via the idea of 'cultural deprivation'. Their focus on such 'deprived' children was new, replacing the idea of low 'intelligence' with an analysis focusing on family life: 'the roots of their problem may in large part be traced to their experiences in homes which do not transmit the cultural patterns necessary for the types of learning characteristic of the schools and the larger society'. They recommended the creation of a whole new type of nursery school, focusing on child-orientated play, language and 'an enthusiasm for learning for its own sake'.⁴⁵

Most of the class- or play-room activities associated with Britain's EPA project owed an explicit, though not uncritical, debt to their American roots. First amongst these was the University of Swansea's Compensatory Education Project, funded by the Schools Council and monitored by a Schools Council Working Party drawing in head teachers, Her Majesty's Inspectors and LEA chairmen.⁴⁶ This research programme looked at children's experiences across England and Wales. The Project used interviews with, and information about, 695 children to track their development as against children in 'middle class or settled working class' schools to see if more could be done to identify *individually* deprived children rather than apparently 'troubled' schools or areas.⁴⁷ It then pressed on to look at how teachers might use links with parents, small-group work, spoken language exercises, familiarity with 'social-emotional concepts' and new oral-visual teaching materials to 'compensate' children for their 'cultural deprivation'.⁴⁸ The language of course owed much to the team's US forerunners. Furthermore, although the researchers came to see most American materials as hastily assembled and often useless in a British context, their ideas were usually developed within the context of what had been learned – positively and negatively – from the American experiments.⁴⁹

'Action-research' owed much to the Scandinavians' localised and experimental drive towards a more egalitarian education system, as we have already seen.⁵⁰ But the idea in this context also had mainly American precedents. The War on Poverty's action programmes usually contained

an element of 'research by doing', treating each intervention as a social research laboratory.⁵¹ The Johnson administration's 'War on Poverty' and its Sure Start educational programmes were at this stage the subject of wild claims as to what they could achieve. Institutional links – and the wealth of American philanthropic institutions – added to the ferment. An extremely tight-knit and transatlantic community of experts emerged. The National Association for the Teaching of English organised an Anglo-American conference on 'the language of failure and the disadvantaged' in the summer of 1968.⁵² Many EPA language development kits and tutorial guides drew on US action-research projects such as the More Effective School Program in New York. Halsey attended an OECD-sponsored conference on educational deprivation at the Ford Foundation during 1969.⁵³ A large group of American officials, academics and heads of research institutes met with their British counterparts – again including Halsey – at Ditchley Park in October that same year. A long session on EPAs saw the Americans, including Stephen Hess, Deputy Assistant to the President for Urban Affairs, stress the need to 'build evaluation into programmes of all kinds'.⁵⁴

Such ideas appealed immediately to British sociologists, ambitiously aiming to make themselves as influential as they imagined their French and American peers to be, but at the same time self-consciously maintaining a 'British' emphasis on qualitative observation.⁵⁵ It was a tradition that reached far back into the eighteenth century, and one with which Halsey, for one, consciously identified himself.⁵⁶ Halsey's 1950s work with D.V. Glass and Jean Floud at the London School of Economics had explored exactly to what extent 'poor' primary schools were located in areas where parents might be unfamiliar with formal learning, as well as the reasons for social selection to grammar school. It was case-by-case research (in this case, conducted in Hertfordshire and Middlesbrough) that helped bring down the 11+, but it was also highly prescient in terms of EPAs.⁵⁷ Such themes were clear enough in British sociology more widely – in the work of such luminaries as Young himself and Peter Wilmott, uncovering working people's lives anew during the 1950s and 1960s. Their interview evidence allowed the voices of both children and parents to emerge – often harshly critical of teachers who just wrote 'something on the wall ... Fucking Napoleon and all that crap'.⁵⁸ Richard Hoggart's moving 1957 account of 'scholarship' boys' travails in the grammar system, *The Uses of Literacy*, helped to reveal their problematic place or lack of it within working-class communities.⁵⁹

As first chairman of the new Social Science Research Council (SSRC), Young was able to help Halsey with SSRC funding for the four out of five EPA action-research areas in England. Halsey, who had been working at Oxford's Barnett House since 1962 in the university's new Department of Social and Administrative Studies, now became Programme Director for the scheme. He was driven by his own idea of a newly activist social science that might change ordinary people's lives: he later described the EPA project as a

'crusade'.⁶⁰ He had himself left school at 16 to work as a sanitary inspector's boy, only for RAF service in wartime and the service's educational scheme to give him a 'second chance' through Westminster College and the LSE. He was a key advocate of manpower planning in the early 1960s OECD seminars we have already considered, before serving inside Crosland's new DES Research Department between 1965 and 1968.⁶¹ But Young's constant attempts to interest the DES in using their central funding for more intangible interventions – 'educational social workers', teachers' aides, extended school hours – met with indifference at the Department, especially after Crosland left to take over at the Board of Trade.⁶² Only a small grant was eventually forthcoming from central government for the 'action-research' programme.⁶³

Problems involved in implementing the EPA agenda

One critical problem of implementation was identifying the neighbourhoods which should be designated either for extra EPA funding or for 'action-research' work, despite an enormous qualitative survey of 3237 parents conducted for Plowden by the government Social Survey.⁶⁴ Parents might well object to school 'overcrowding', but their selective impressions clearly could not guide the actual selection of areas singled out for aid. Schools Branch in Whitehall raised this as an objection immediately Plowden was available, and suggested using only figures of teacher shortage as a shorthand:

The Report gives the Secretary of State the task of selecting the schools ... even if local authority opposition to our assuming such a function could be overcome (which seems unlikely), I do not think anything approaching true objectivity could be achieved in making the selection. The task would seem ... certain to be a most invidious one, involving endless trouble for the Secretary of State of practical and political kinds.⁶⁵

Confusion reigned as to what an 'Educational Priority Area' might look like. Should they be urban alone, or include pockets of rural poverty too? Crosland, for one, made clear he wanted to 'draw a distinction between a slum area in Shoreditch ... and a small mining village with poor housing and poor cultural background where the kids still had plenty of room and enough to eat'. He wanted to favour the former.⁶⁶

Expert observers such as David Donnison argued that British investigators had very strong theories to deal with issues of social structure and income life 'cycles' of poverty. What they did not have was a really strong spatial ideology that winnowed out children on the basis of *where they lived* rather than *who they were*: 'the social theory underpinning this approach [of area initiatives]', he wrote, 'is weaker, and its policy implications more confused, than those of the other traditions ... Most children in EPAs are not specially deprived, and most of the deprived are not in EPAs.'⁶⁷ It was an attack taken

up across the educational spectrum, as well as among the political left more generally.⁶⁸ One HMI, indeed, told the Schools Council Working Party on Compensatory Education that 'educational retardation ... is not confined to any social class or area. It may be sufficiently obvious to merit special attention, but it can easily be concealed in a performance generally acceptable but nevertheless below the child's full capacity.'⁶⁹ The SSRC's final assessment of some of the EPA reports concluded that 'there is no "proper" definition of an EPA ... each area is unique'.⁷⁰

Prodigious and impressive efforts went into surveying EPA schools, a project eventually written up as the second volume of the official reports by the sociologist Joan Payne, who worked in Halsey's Oxford team. But a wealth of detail on pupils from 44 of the schools eventually chosen for 'action-research' work themselves contained a vast range of achievement and of problems. Immigrant children did less well on vocabulary tests, as might be expected, but the scores of different immigrant groups were variegated, to say the least; girls' and boys' relative vocabulary differed very strongly across the different EPAs.⁷¹ In the end 572 schools in England and Wales were selected for extra funding on the basis of six very rough indicators of need – overcrowding in the home and immigrant numbers, for instance – a much vaguer set of criteria than were in use for the more tightly drawn Urban Programme.⁷² Those schools received the supplementary building provision within the existing building programme, as well as an additional £75 in pay for each teacher. About half the money was to be allocated to minor works, so that if the Plowden recommendation of £5000 spending on each school was followed, 1600 schools could be upgraded.⁷³ The results are summarised in Table 10.1.

Table 10.1 EPA spending, major conurbations, England and Wales, 1968–70, £000s, current prices

	<i>EPA major works</i>	<i>EPA minor works</i>	<i>Normal building: major works</i>	<i>Normal building: minor works</i>	<i>EPA as % of major works</i>	<i>EPA as % of minor works</i>
ILEA	1630	634	3451	1100	47.2	57.6
Birmingham	1648	157	787	400	209.4	39.2
Liverpool	758	245	266	266	284.9	92.1
Lancashire	453	455	5718	820	7.9	55.5
Manchester	340	458	356	256	95.5	178.9
Sheffield	377	148	142	200	265.5	78.0
Leeds	385	100	364	200	105.8	50.0
<i>Total (E&W)</i>	<i>12,891</i>	<i>3123</i>	<i>39,070</i>	<i>10,809</i>	<i>32.9</i>	<i>28.9</i>

Source: House of Commons Debates, vol. 774, cols 163–6, Bacon written answer, 28 November 1968.

The areas chosen for follow-up via the separate but parallel ‘action-research’ were also extremely heterogeneous. Conisbrough in South Yorkshire was a relatively small mining town suffering from the gradual run-down of its prime industry. It was overwhelmingly working class, white and ‘settled’ in that most of the schools’ mothers had themselves been born there. The contrast with the more socially mixed, ethnically diverse and less tight-knit Birmingham EPA could not have been greater.⁷⁴ The London and Birmingham EPA areas – in Deptford and Balsall Heath – were more stereotypically working-class ‘grey areas’ within enormous conurbations, though the Birmingham district had far higher numbers of immigrants. The Liverpool study encompassed a much larger share of the city’s inner ring, covering a population of over 85,000.⁷⁵ The Dundee EPA was different again, suffering from much more acute industrial decline than even the more rural Conisbrough that it in some ways resembled. It consisted of a relatively compact 500-acre site in the city’s old ‘Hilltown’, containing a number of large new tower blocks, tenements and older terrace housing. The city had been hard hit by the collapse of its jute industry; its lack of amenities and overcrowding was even worse than the other study areas.⁷⁶

The academics and civil servants who had to decide on the areas that might benefit from these intensive methods might be thought to have done rather well given the state of the data in 1967–68 – at least if one focuses on the depth of poverty. Even in the early twenty-first century, two of the four English EPAs certainly came within the 10 per cent ‘most deprived’ that Plowden wanted to help; and although none of them fell within the ‘bottom’ 10 per cent of actual educational attainment by then, many small areas within them did.⁷⁷ Halsey himself took issue with the detractors in his official report on the action-research projects, pointing out that ‘under-achievers’ (defined by attaining only the bottom 10 per cent of test scores) were indeed concentrated in the EPA schools: 16 per cent of the children in the West Riding EPA schools achieved such scores; 23 per cent in Deptford; 33 per cent in Liverpool; and 49 per cent in Birmingham. These were of course higher figures than for the ‘average’ or ‘normal’ school.⁷⁸ All the same, this meant that less than half the pupils were ‘under-achievers’ in this controversial sense. As the Dundee project team noted, the actual criteria used in the end had little to do with educational attainment, whether measured through test scores or anything else. On this, or even on the scheme’s published criteria, several of the older 1920s suburbs contained both more poverty and lower tested ‘attainment’.⁷⁹

Enormous amounts of innovative work was done. Courses for school managers, usually a mix of local councillors, business people and a university representative, were also set up to think about the use of schools ‘after hours’, and to ‘act as interpreters between school and parents or other members of the community’.⁸⁰ Enthusiastic EPA staff, such as the Liverpool Project Director Eric Midwinter, made sure that schools loudly trumpeted their achievements. Midwinter involved the Liverpool College of Art to

produce newsletters, 'glossy and attractive' prospectuses and magazines containing children's writing and art. Classroom visits and coffee mornings also seemed an enormous success. As Midwinter noted: 'response to the class focus has been, in the event, amazingly strong; sometimes with every child having a relative in attendance. Their interest is encouraging and there is little disruption; one or two teachers find the children very much on their best behaviour and not at all overexcited.'⁸¹

The idea of the 'community school' was also developed. The Inner London Education Authority opened teachers' centres to advise educational professionals on the new ideas; produced a handbook on home-school relations; and opened schools and playgrounds after hours. The Deptford EPA project involved College of Education students mentoring schoolchildren, involving them in the work of the College and then taking them home, in the process forging what the HMI called 'very helpful relationships' with the parents. It designated three primaries as community schools, paying extra for five teachers in each to organise activities with parents.⁸² Interested in experimenting with methods that might effect some of those changes, and in consultation with Liverpool University's School of Education, the Liverpool EPA scheme paid 25 per cent of a tutor-organiser's salary to work on adult education with the area's parents.⁸³ Midwinter managed to build up links between community councils, community centres, residents' associations, various local projects and the schools. It should be noted, however, that after an initial period of failure the most successful adult education scheme took place only after an in-depth survey of what residents wanted, and was held in a local community centre, *not* the uncomfortably formal and class-ridden environment of a school.⁸⁴

However, attempts to organise such work through the Workers' Education Association, through school lectures and even rather popular exhibitions in department stores, were a failure compared to 'home-based' activities in less formal venues.⁸⁵ Class misunderstanding and prejudice stymied some of the more structured initiatives. Discussions held within the Liverpool EPA course for school managers became bogged down in discussions of who was to take legal responsibility for work out of school hours, including the following question: 'what if the activities suggested were at variance with the educational role of the school? For instance, what if the people in the district requested bingo?'⁸⁶ ILEA noted that even in its three community schools, it was usually teachers who made all the decisions after 'due consultation'. Along with the wider project of encouraging parental links with school, the Authority's interim report admitted that this had 'been the most difficult part of our project to get going. This is a little disappointing ... it was clear in the early stages, however, that some schools did not particularly value the intervention of parents in any way.'⁸⁷

Nor was it clear what the teachers and parents were actually supposed to *get out of* extra access and meetings, or what more 'involvement' was supposed

to change.⁸⁸ Was it to inform parents of what was happening in the school, or bring teachers closer to local people's lives? The ideas surrounding actual practice remained very indistinct.⁸⁹ Parents often viewed the more innovative EPA experiments in a less flattering light, and parents and teachers were often at cross-purposes. Tom Lovett found that 'the very parents who were so radical in their criticisms of social service and local government bureaucracies were quite conservative in their approach to schools and schooling'.⁹⁰ Alan Blyth, Professor of Education at Liverpool, summed up the problem for the Schools Council Working Party: 'the teacher/parent relationship may be more than just a matter of teachers finding ways of getting parents to be more active ... It may be that there are fundamental issues, social, political or religious, about which they do not agree, and in that case compensatory education may be viewed as an invasion of parental prerogative.'⁹¹

By this stage abundant evidence was casting grave doubts on the efficacy of the American area programmes. The urban rioting and social upheaval of 1967–68 served to make many observers pessimistic as to the impact of anti-poverty programmes, including Ambassador Sir Patrick Dean in Washington.⁹² Several academic studies, including for the US Commission on Civil Rights in 1967 and for Westinghouse in 1969, seemed to show that Head Start was having little impact – though that programme provided more traditional nursery and kindergarten places, rather than emerging from the concept of 'compensatory education' through an emphasis on linguistic and cognitive skills.⁹³ Even more seriously in terms of government policy, enormous hopes and demands were raised and evoked of programmes that were necessarily limited in both time and money, especially in the short term. Having taken evidence from American activists and experts, the Schools Council Working Party considered in 1968 that the American example 'gave a clear warning of what could happen in the UK ... many parents who keep away from school nonetheless care about their children's educational problems but are unwilling to discuss these, because of a feeling of shame about the child's poor performance'.⁹⁴

US urban initiatives often subordinated their loudly declared process of consultation to their implicit social and economic objectives. Two sets of concepts – local activism or economic 'regeneration' as defined in City Hall – often proved hard to reconcile. In short, the rational and smooth 'planning' that would endlessly feed back community views to decision-makers was an abstract far from reality. The sociologists Peter Marris and Martin Rein worked closely with these programmes, and underlined in 1967 'the struggle of community action to reconcile contending ideals, its uneasy turning round upon its own arguments [and the] fundamental dilemmas of social choice'.⁹⁵ More famously, Daniel Moynihan – who worked on the Community Action Programs at the Department of Labor between 1961 and 1965 – was deeply pessimistic in his 1969 polemic *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*. There he termed the programme a 'sell-out' that usually collapsed in acrimony

between radicalised black and liberal white Americans. Conservatives were emboldened, even politically re-energised by the 'waste' involved; universities were trapped in the cross-fire; cliques of local anti-poverty leaders were often brought down by ideological disputation or scandal. Congressional Democrats took fright and reduced the scale and scope of these programmes.⁹⁶

Divides emerge among the reformers

Many CDP and EPA activists also became highly radicalised; CDP project teams indeed coming to see central government initiatives as 'empty rhetoric'.⁹⁷ More radical project workers such as Midwinter, and the Liverpool action-research project he led, came to think that the apparently 'open' EPA institution often became 'merely a school that welcomes in the parents or is open in the evening for father to do a bit of fretwork'. He contended that a more inclusive, pupil-orientated and community-designed education was now necessary to make these schools relevant to the people around them – as Bloom, Davis and Hess had originally argued. Simply teaching English and Mathematics on the old abstract lines, albeit perhaps in slightly new ways and with more 'help', could never be enough.⁹⁸ An 'old' sociology, focused on allowing poorer pupils to access existing curricula, was in short being challenged by a new set of ideas stressing a different and parallel curriculum that would allow children access to powerful concepts through the experiences of their own lives – a set of concepts Geoff Whitty has termed 'naïve possibilitarianism'.⁹⁹

Halsey had never been an uncomplicated or uncritical enthusiast, and although he looked forward to 'a new style of administration' that would be as 'experimental' as 'practical', he understood that the EPAs and CDPs were not perfect laboratories on scientific grounds. As he wrote in the *Times Literary Supplement* during 1970, 'there are "social problems" which cannot be adequately formulated in terms approximating to those of medical problems ... If all social problems were like that there would be no need for politicians.'¹⁰⁰ But he did have subtly different aims and methods to the more inclusive and radical Liverpool project – ethical dilemmas, and conflicting goals, that remained, however 'scientific' action-research claimed to be.¹⁰¹ Maintaining existing middle-class educational norms, Midwinter argued, would mean that 'failure is the norm and the irrelevancy ... damaging ... this assuredly is the most crushing irony of the twentieth century[:] that this strange, diverged heritage [of the curriculum] should become the cachet for hard, material success'.¹⁰²

The Dundee project report came to even more radical conclusions involving the reconstruction of social life as a whole: 'educational deprivation, let alone societal or economic deprivation, can be tackled only in part through the educational service ... if radical change is desired, plans to bring it about must involve public policies relating not merely to education and

“social work”, but to social, and with it economic, structure’.¹⁰³ These were points of very strong dispute when the two men came to present their findings to the educational establishment. April 1972 conferences at York and Edge Hill College of Education – attended by educationalists and officials alike – were marred by disputes over this issue, as ‘some of those present saw this prescription ... as leading to the widening of the gulf between the cultures and classes’.¹⁰⁴ Alan Sinfield has perceptively observed just these tensions in play across British culture as a whole. The contradictions within ‘the welfare-capitalist recycling of high culture’, between those who wanted to open up access to what Newsom called ‘our civilisation’, and reformers such as Midwinter who thought that ‘our civilisation’ could and should be transformed, were never more evident.¹⁰⁵

Containing the idea of a national programme, 1970–72

The sands were shifting more generally under some – though not all – of the idea’s foundations. The Conservatives in Opposition focused their attention on primary schools rather than pre-school provision, a priority they held to in office despite the fact that secondary rolls were increasing more quickly than primary numbers in the early 1970s.¹⁰⁶ Halsey was told that this sector would have the first call on resources.¹⁰⁷ Many civil servants were still dubious about the idea of defining EPAs from the top down, through the use of collective data, and wanted to see new ways of using data on individuals on ‘priority children’ to ‘establish ... the number of children likely to be educationally backward, emotionally deprived, or prone to delinquency attending a particular school’.¹⁰⁸

Linked to this concept was Keith Joseph’s famous June 1972 speech, as Secretary of State for Social Services, about ‘cycles of deprivation’ – locating the problem of poverty more firmly within the family unit and its deficiencies, rather than in the social and environmental factors stressed more clearly by Plowden and the EPA project teams. Though it is a lesser-known fact that Joseph’s speech also announced another £1bn in Urban Programme money for nursery daycare provision, the second half of the speech made clear that the whole idea of early intervention was now to mitigate the influence of the apparently chaotic home lives of large and poor families. It was a different concept to Plowden’s, and a world away from the more radical implications of (for instance) the Liverpool action-research scheme. The Pre-School Playgroups Association, of which Plowden was chair, was appalled by early drafts of the speech, and uneasy about the final and negotiated result.¹⁰⁹

Margaret Thatcher, Secretary of State between 1970 and February 1974, was sympathetic to the idea of more parental involvement in schools, but the teachers’ unions were implacably opposed to this threat to their professional autonomy. Civil servants, characteristically, advised that ‘Halsey’s Hybrids’ were too risky, and the existing administrative structures and

schools should be employed in the new push on the nursery and primary front.¹¹⁰ Confronted with Halsey's recommendations at a time of enormous constraints on public expenditure, the Permanent Secretary William Pile minuted that 'Professor Halsey clearly ... [had] an imperfect knowledge of the realities of the situation ... but the difficulties are so obvious in the face of the facts that I believe that, carefully presented, even Professor Halsey can be made to see them.'¹¹¹ Halsey himself had already met with Thatcher in March and July 1972, but learned very quickly that she wanted to restrict his programme to focus resources on the most vulnerable – from which he learned, as he mused much later, 'that the political redefinition of an expansive idea could be transformed back towards restrictionism by way of emphasis on ... the distribution of public funds to those most in need'.¹¹²

This should have come as little surprise to Halsey, for the Conservatives' Policy Group on Education had in Opposition concluded that 'positive discrimination in favour of ... primary schools in the deprived areas ... should be regarded as good Conservative policy which conforms to the party principles of priority for obvious needs'.¹¹³ This form of spending would thus form a welfare 'safety net' in line with the Heathite concept of a sparser, more focused and more 'efficient' welfare state that helped the neediest. It was a line of reasoning that at least avoided the danger of ignoring electorally 'Labour' areas of the country, as did Hogg, concerned that they should 'not make too much of the deprived areas. They do not as a rule include our constituencies.'¹¹⁴ Thatcher had indeed already told Heath in 1970 that while the 'problem' of 'deprived children' was 'intractable', 'much could be done by the provision of play groups and day nurseries for under-fives, but this was extremely expensive. It might be possible to make a start in the worst-affected places.'¹¹⁵ The Conservatives' pollsters had additionally already informed them that 'on the question of where more money should be concentrated, there is greater concern with improving primary schools than with any other fashionable issue'.¹¹⁶ Thatcher's December 1972 White Paper, *A Framework for Expansion*, focused its attention on primaries, and only then on the expansion of nursery education – admittedly a key Plowden aim – rather than help for poorer communities *per se*. All that was promised was that 'areas of disadvantage' would be a priority for this nursery programme, with the criteria for their selection guided by the Urban Programme.¹¹⁷

Civil servants usually claimed that they were sympathetic to the EPA idea.¹¹⁸ A great deal of private correspondence belied their public stance, however. Home Office officials objected to spending CDP money on school areas due to 'fundamental doubts about its usefulness'.¹¹⁹ In particular one memorandum, from the Deputy Secretary in charge of schools, Wilma Harte, bears quoting at length:

Dr Halsey's report ... [is] pretty superficial and intellectually thin. But I am allergic to left-wing sociological efforts. They are so often marked

by padding taking the form of quotations from and references to other productions from the same stable ... and by the stringing together of the fashionable 'in' words which make the morally acceptable impact on the reader ... to make it impossible to attach any real meaning. I do not doubt for one moment that good and useful work has been done ... but the report itself seems to me to say nothing that could not have been said by anyone who shared Dr Halsey's basic view of life on half a sheet of paper without the benefit of any research ... I would find the Halsey style of dogma much easier to swallow if only somewhere there could be a recognition of the fact that there are plenty of people who do less well in school and in later life than other people, not because they are black, or female, or live in Balsall Heath, or have parents who will not let them speak at mealtimes ... but because they actually are stupid, or nasty, or hopeless. But the will of the wisp of equality of educational opportunity and subsequent achievement in later life is obviously irresistibly attractive to the middle class sociologist.¹²⁰

Pile upbraided Harte with the words 'it is great fun to bait the sociologists. [But] it is not so easy to decide which line we should take.' But even the terms of that reproach are instructive. Her views, though not widespread in the virulent form expressed in her memorandum, were symptomatic of a certain disdain for 'theory' inside the DES, and a preference for 'practical' advice and decision-making.¹²¹ The Conservatives were going with the grain of officials' view that EPAs were a good way to concentrate efforts, not Halsey's concept of more thoroughgoing changes in teaching and learning.

The eventual circular that emerged from the debate, issued early in 1973, did include a small extra premium for nursery places in poorer areas. But there was to be no central direction for a new EPA programme, and no encouragement for 'community' schools. The Dundee report in particular was slipped out in Scotland with a minimum of fuss, and only a very brief Circular. The Scottish Office had long preferred a more 'general' policy for 'disadvantaged children' across a range of services, rather than a specifically *educational* programme. This reflected Scottish civil servants' sense that they were 'ahead' of England on issues of youth, delinquency and social work.¹²² More generally, Plowden's nursery school targets were not uncongenial to the Conservatives, but were still not met until 1981. The Social Science Research Council and the DES rebuffed attempts by both Brian Jackson and Young, who put forward the concept of an advisory National Institute, to build up a more permanent research programme with government money.¹²³ The four English LEAs involved were encouraged to apply for help under the Urban Programme instead.¹²⁴ It was a more piecemeal solution that made the universal spread of EPA ideas much less likely, but was more comfortable for a Ministry that believed LEAs should be the locus of new developments, and that these were more likely to become entrenched if they were 'owned'

locally. Midwinter set up his own Institute in Liverpool instead, without departmental funds.¹²⁵ To be sure, some EPA projects were also kept going by the LEAs involved.¹²⁶ But Halsey referred in print, and in official DES publications, to the ‘disappointingly slow’ progress on community schools, nursery provision and the central collection of data.¹²⁷

Plowden had imagined something rather different – more generalised, increasingly universal, and continuing to change and grow. Lady Plowden had recommended that *every* LEA make a poverty survey and practise ‘positive discrimination’ with their own budgets – something that would be assisted by a National Survey, not just of buildings, but of social conditions in each area. She further argued that after the ‘crash programme’ ended in 1972, the concept should be extended throughout the country, and to secondary schools as well.¹²⁸ Whatever the successes registered by the short-term programme, this did not happen, a point Lady Plowden herself returned to again and again in her public pronouncements.¹²⁹ In 1974/75 EPA schools receiving the extra money for teachers’ pay were even renamed ‘social priority schools’.¹³⁰

Conclusions: the Plowden effect fades

The educational progress we covered in Chapter 9 helped to create the conditions in which EPAs seemed necessary. Building more secondary schools in new areas made Britain’s urban schools seem dim and dingy; emphasising the 11+, and then the new and modern comprehensive school, added to parental and local political ambition. But as those conditions changed, and splits among the activists grew wider, sociologists eventually peeled away from Halsey’s optimistic coalition. They moved towards a more pessimistic and deterministic Marxism exemplified by Michael Flude and John Ahier’s 1974 *Educability, Schools and Ideology*, and the 1976 Open University Reader, *Schooling and Capitalism*.¹³¹ Meanwhile ministers and officialdom neutered even what rhetoric there had been about ‘compensatory education’, let alone ‘child-centred learning’, especially after Prime Minister Callaghan’s famous Ruskin College speech of 1976. Callaghan’s ‘Great Debate’ heralded many decades of emphasis on the ‘three Rs’, the needs of the economy, and governments’ wish to control any experimentation in school policy from the centre.¹³² The funds available to the education sector were cut back drastically after the mid-1970s: by 1990 they had fallen by nearly a third in terms of GDP.¹³³ The Urban Programme’s very small budget was successively reduced in the 1980s, as the Thatcher governments turned towards neo-liberal Urban Development Corporations and small-scale central initiatives such as Estate Challenge to meet their objectives.¹³⁴

Only with the renewed advent of Labour governments between 1997 and 2010 was there a return to ‘area-based policies’, selecting 25 areas as ‘Education Action Zones’.¹³⁵ A host of other initiatives and spending mechanisms were

also pressed into use on an area basis. Local Sure Start centres, capital grants to nursery schools under the Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative, out-of-school childcare provision, Early Excellence Centres providing ‘integrated care’, and grants made under the Excellence in Cities programme: all served to make the school funding package increasingly redistributive in terms of ‘poorest’ and ‘richest’ wards. Over £700m was being spent on all these policies in both 2002/3 and 2003/4.¹³⁶ Multidisciplinary teams again encouraged schools to provide ‘wraparound’ care, including breakfast and Saturday clubs, mentoring and links with families. Sure Start local programmes reached 400,000 children by 2004; 98 per cent of four-year-olds, and 88 per cent of three-year-olds, were taking up nursery places.¹³⁷

These efforts were, however, vitiated by a sense of historical amnesia familiar from many other elements of the Blair project, declaring that despite the EPAs and the Urban Programme ‘there is little hard evidence about what works’.¹³⁸ Both the concepts behind, and the results issuing from, these projects suffered from flaws that should have been familiar from the EPA experience. The focus was again on economic and social inequalities and remedies, rather than what educationalists such as Sally Power term *cultural* and *associational* injustices – the way in which educational and other institutions are institutionally discriminatory towards minorities and those on low incomes.¹³⁹ The idea that white working-class or immigrant children might adhere to *different* norms, and have *different* needs, ambitions and beliefs as opposed to middle-class pupils, had still not penetrated the official mind. The debate between liberals dedicated to bringing young people up to a ‘standard’, on Marshallian lines, and those increasingly committed to changing the curriculum and the whole meaning of schooling, predictably now resurfaced.¹⁴⁰ Severe problems remained in terms of involving parents: most were very happy with *formal* feedback, but schools were failing to provide services, such as day nurseries, which many people wanted.¹⁴¹ Both outcomes might have been predicted by observers familiar with the EPA experiment.

Meanwhile, differences in educational attainment played an enormously important role in the sharply rising inequality of the 1980s and early 1990s, since those without post-16 qualifications were effectively shut out of those jobs which the economy was producing.¹⁴² The relationship between levels of formal parental education and child literacy was very strong in Great Britain compared to most other countries, only very slowly converging with ‘average’ international experience. The UK became a country characterised by a poisonous mix of relatively high income inequality and low aspiration, as measured by the numbers of 15-year-olds from low-income households aspiring to low-skilled work.¹⁴³ At the same time as post-compulsory education became increasingly important in the job market, successive governments’ insistence on parental ‘choice’ and the development of childcare ‘markets’ also meant that schools became more divided in terms of social

class and income.¹⁴⁴ Priority areas were untested when Lady Plowden recommended them; they were absorbed into governmental practice for a range of conflicting, self-interested reasons; they often had the paradoxical results of dividing reformers, alienating and confusing parents or assisting middle-class children in predominantly poorer areas. They struggled, on this basis, to gain long-term purchase on the policy agenda. But that does not mean that Plowden's report or its legacy have become irrelevant.

11

Conclusion: Strange Triumphs?

Each stage of our analysis in this book has unravelled another set of unintended consequences. On the global stage, British governments enthusiastically joined in the work of international advisory bodies, only to engender a sense of panic when Britain fell further and further down international 'growth' or 'welfare' leagues. Civil servants and ministers often implemented 'modernistic' Scandinavian solutions, uncovering in the process more and more reasons why their own peculiarly British system worked the way it did. Successive Presidents and Prime Ministers tried to keep Anglo-American power at the centre of the international relations system, only to endanger the strength of their currencies in an apparently never-ending and little-understood sequence of interventions. At home, governments created an Ombudsman which then exposed unwelcome policy-making realities to the public; employed more economists, to be told that experts were less and less confident about what they knew; and attempted to hold down the price of land, only to force it up as landowners withheld their property from the market. Enormous advances in educational provision also became problematical. Expanding grammar schools caused enormous pain and frustration among parents whose children did not 'pass' their 11+ examination. Building new secondary schools in suburban areas made primary provision and inner-city schools seem threadbare.

The example of education is instructive – for there, more than anywhere, the public seemed to make ever more ambitious, and ever more incompatible, demands on Britain's centralised policy process. This was felt to be a general phenomenon. As the political scientist Michael Crozier put it for the private Anglo-American–Japanese Trilateral Commission in 1975:

The vague and persistent feeling that democracies have become ungovernable has been growing steadily in Western Europe. The case of Britain has become the most dramatic example of this malaise ... social and economic developments ... have given rise to a growing paradox. While it has been traditionally believed that the power of the state depended

on the number of decisions it could take, the more decisions the modern state has to handle, the more helpless it becomes. Decisions do not only bring power; they also bring vulnerability.¹

The sociologist Raymond Boudon gave these problems a more conservative gloss when he posited that the massive expansion of education in the post-war world had increased social competition, then multiplying jealousy of, and quarrels with, its beneficiaries' apparent 'privilege' and 'advantages'. 'Increasing and levelling out the opportunities of all', he wrote, might increase 'the general level of frustration' experienced by those disadvantaged by those educational improvements. Though educational, psychological, economic and political experts would retain their particular ability to solve specific problems, their explanations of social life overall would then fall into disrepute.²

The intellectual concept of 'modernisation' itself also came under strain. The idea was increasingly countered as simplistic and potentially self-destructive, even when applied to its 'home' discipline of development studies.³ It was a theory that attempted to be all-encompassing but which owed much to the deterministic idea that because economically developed societies had followed one particular path, all countries must do so. This, too, is a deep-seated and persistent idea. Hood has shown, for instance, how modern 'public management' theories claim to be a clear-cut break with the past, unavoidable and irreversible, internationally convergent and largely beneficent.⁴ 'Modernisers' thus failed to draw out the true *analytical* well-springs of growth and development, treating them as inevitable and relying on inaccurate and over-theoretical constructions of 'backwardness' among less developed countries that hid their real strengths and resilience.⁵

This book has attracted attention to some of the more everyday reasons for growing elite and popular frustration with post-war British governance – some of the prosaic reasons why complexity, rising expectations and doubts about 'modernisation' reached the top of the policy agenda at one and the same time. As the structural complexity and international exposure of the economy grew in the post-war era, these problems became ever more acute. Information became harder to gather, despite novel informational technologies, since it came in from increasingly numerous centres of power. Decisions slowed down, the interests involved more heterogeneous.⁶ Building on Robert Merton's original insights, the sociologist Sam Sieber has contended that the 'conversion mechanisms' that turn intended into unintended consequences are more likely to function at higher levels 'in interventions that represent institutional complexes'. As both the economy and the bureaucracy became more complex – the number of companies in manufacturing alone doubled, while public employment rose from six million to over seven million between the early 1950s and the late 1970s – that insight was ever more likely to hold true.⁷

These paradoxes were not purely confined to Britain's social democratic era. They are to some extent inherent in economic and social life. Historians have detected just such effects in the Victorian and Edwardian periods, as we saw in the Introduction. To be sure, governance since the resurgence of neo-liberal policies in the 1980s and 1990s has also been full of unexpected results. The Thatcher government's initial monetarist phase saw inflation refuse to react to tighter control of the money supply – a 'linear' assumption indeed. Rampant price rises saw the money supply balloon even as governments 'printed less money'. Even the introduction of apparently self-governing quasi-markets and a competitive 'new public management' also encountered unexpected barriers to success. Insisting on rewarding public servants by results required politicians to take more control over the state apparatus, not less, and to set more store by processes and bureaucratic machinery than they would have liked. Arms-length, and supposedly more independent, neutral policy actors ended up more politicised than a civil service often lambasted for its inefficiencies; financial stringency and an emphasis on 'step changes' and 'revolutions' in delivery seemed often to entrench, rather than destroy, existing practices.⁸

Even so, this book has demonstrated how these tensions were heightened in the post-war 'golden age' by successive governments' bold and conjoined claims for the march of modernity, management and welfare. This volume might indeed have examined many other post-Second World War examples – the role of a more national water management system in making droughts generally worse as cities extended their claims on rivers and reservoirs, for instance.⁹ The scale and scope of governments' ideological and practical ambitions in the period examined here – their attempts to reform international governance, the global economy, relations between people and Parliament as well as education, all at the same time – promoted at least a *sense* of incapacity within administrative and political circles. The feeling grew all the while that governments were not in control of events. As Samuel Brittan confided to his diary: 'where does power lie? At [the] top [it] seems to lie with "experts"; at assistant secretary level in departments. But people at that level have to work in restricted policy framework[s] which they are in no position to question. Policy is dictated by external events and [the] general climate of opinion, which causes them; or are they "statistically" determined? Or even randomly?'¹⁰ Alec Cairncross concluded, less diplomatically, that 'bureaucracies even in normal times are usually slightly mad and in moments of crisis easily become crazy ... The atmosphere of a large government department is frequently almost indistinguishable from that of the looney bin.'¹¹ Even much more optimistic policy-makers – for instance the Labour MP Jeremy Bray – were frank about the 'chronic' problems of identifying difficulties in a timely manner, and directing perhaps contradictory cross-departmental strategies.¹²

Brittan noted in private that civil servants could 'waste vast amount of time on speeches which regurgitate all policies. Then on consulting Departments within [their] own Ministry ... [with] constant retyping ... this is quite apart from all the committees. Officials attend so many meetings with other officials ... that most of [their] time [is] taken up. [There is] very little time to think.'¹³ It was often impossible to communicate to politicians during the day-to-day business of government. Cairncross later argued that it was preferable to rely on rules of thumb or 'two or three rather elementary economic concepts, which I had assumed would be familiar to everyone', but 'were often not at all well-understood by non-economists'.¹⁴ As politicians and officials became gloomier, they were unknowingly exhibiting what the great American exponent of organisational economics, Albert Hirschman, once termed the 'power and vitality of disappointment' in public life. Public actors lack information; they therefore lack time to think; they become overcommitted and addicted to the policy process itself. We have seen enough of these mechanisms at work in these pages to validate Hirschman's insight.¹⁵

It is no wonder that a literature examining the mental and physical health of leading politicians has begun to emerge. Senior civil servants appear to enjoy rather better health as they move up the career ladder; not so British Cabinet Ministers. The unremitting mental pressure and unending line of ministerial files inevitably take their toll. Even the robust and pugilistic Denis Healey recorded day after day of 'to bed dog-tired' in his diary while Chancellor in the 1970s. By the beginning of the 1976 IMF crisis he thought himself 'close to demoralisation'.¹⁶ Anthony Eden's mental collapse during the Suez Crisis is well known. Macmillan seems to have been unusually highly strung, which eventually led to his resignation in a health scare; Wilson probably developed Alzheimer's; Edward Heath fell prey to hypothyroidism after leaving office.¹⁷

Civil servants and ministers had become unknowing victims of what Ulrich Beck has termed the 'risk society'. Beck used this term to describe the stage of late and conflicted modernisation that is marked by a high degree of personal insecurity and new technical, scientific and economic demands on the state – group and personal pressures that are often difficult to cope with.¹⁸ This was, to be sure, quite the opposite of central government's intentions – but it seemed beyond their power to avoid becoming entangled in the manifold complex dilemmas involved in meeting those demands. In the 1970s neo-Marxists realised this very well. As Paul Willis put it in his 1977 study of educational reform and working-class boys, *Learning to Labour*, 'no institutional objective, no moral or pedagogic initiative, moves in the clear still air of good intention and Newtonian cultural mechanics. Every move must be considered in relation to its context and likely circles of effectiveness within the netherworld (usually to institutional and official eyes) of cultural reproduction and the main world of social class relationships.'¹⁹

Yet it is important, as Hood, Margetts and Perri 6 have reminded us, to note that some paradoxes and unintended consequences can be happy ones. Wilson decided, on political and foreign policy grounds, not to fight in Vietnam; this immeasurably strengthened, rather than weakened, Britain's economic and diplomatic position as it struggled to support a weak currency.²⁰ Britain was able to take advantage of the ironies and paradoxes within American power to secure a better deal for herself than would otherwise have been forthcoming. The Ombudsman, to take just one more example, expanded into whole new areas Wilson and Compton had never imagined – to the benefit of many citizens. Nothing in these pages should be taken as advocating or advancing what Hirschman has termed the first of three key concepts in conservatism: namely, 'perversity', the idea 'that any purposive action to improve some feature of the political, social or economic order only serves to exacerbate the condition one wants to remedy'.²¹ Few of the paradoxes considered here have uncovered such direct or obvious reverses. Though perhaps often achieving 'perverse' effects, the British government's actions rarely made the exact problem under scrutiny worse. They usually caused problems to emerge in other arenas, evoked unheralded opposition, or produced unexpected second-order problems of management and administration.

Theorists across the range of the social sciences have begun to put just these complicated insights into effect, a trend particularly evident in the adoption of concepts such as 'complex adaptive systems' in development theory. Such complex systems are not amenable to 'command-and-control methods and detailed forecasts and plans', for methods 'appropriate for linear systems are inappropriate ... in situations driven by internal dynamics that involve vast numbers of interactions, and where results cannot be traced back to specific causes'.²² It is an insight familiar from management studies texts that stress 'messy leadership' and 'messy organisations', as well as the importance of 'mindful', 'differentiated' and above all *flexible* resilience in avoiding the 'trap' of rigid planning for rapid change in periods of stability.²³ The significance of a sense of 'chaotic' change is amplified by the concept's presence as far distant from academic management studies as feminist political thinking that rejects 'symmetrical' male social structures, post-modern 'butterfly' economics that divines huge upheavals initiated by tiny changes, and popular economics recommending an 'oblique' or indirect approach to problems.²⁴

This new awareness of politics' chaotic nature has not quite fed into historians' own strategies.²⁵ This is despite the fact that lively public debates, as yet unresolved, are reverberating across the political spectrum on how to press these concepts into use for actual public policy. Localism and decentralisation are in vogue, at least in theory; concepts such as 'a new power of civil association', allowing all front-line public servants to form co-operatives and run their own wards or classes, are commonplace.²⁶ A 'creative' or

even 'chaotic' state has become the new panacea that might supersede the command-and-control models of the past – a recommendation, of course, that will not escape its own ironic or perverse outcomes.²⁷ It is this multi-dimensional sense of history, governance and choice that we must grasp to understand the welfare state's unsteady progress in the post-Second World War era: for that period witnessed the creation of a linear settlement that found the governance of change anything but reliable and settled, and an economic boom that promoted uncertainty rather than confidence. Such were the paradoxes of progress.

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2 The Use and Abuse of Foreign Archetypes in British Economic Policy

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7 Sir Alec Cairncross and the Art and Craft of Economic Advice, 1961–69

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8 'An All Over Expansion': The Politics of the Land in 'Golden Age' Britain

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Fabian Society papers
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Personal papers of J.M. Lee
Peter Shore papers

Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library and Archives, Austin, Texas (LBJ)

Anthony Solomon papers
Francis Bator papers
Henry Fowler papers
National Security Country files (NSCF)
National Security Country Histories (NSCH)

National Archives of Scotland, Edinburgh (NAS)

AF, Crofting Development files
DD, Housing Department files
ED, Papers of the Scottish Education Department
GD, Records of the Scottish Landowners' Federation
HH, Home and Health Department papers
SOE, Personnel Service files

National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew (NAUK)

BA, Records of the Civil Service Department
BT, Board of Trade files
CAB, Papers of the Cabinet Office
DSIR, Papers of the Department of Economic Affairs
ED, Ministry/Department of Education files
EW, Department of Economic Affairs papers
EY, Records of the Social Science Research Council
HLG, Ministry of Housing files
HO, Home Office files
INF, Ministry of Information/Central Office of Information papers
LAB, Ministry of Labour/Department of Employment files
LCO, Papers of the Lord Chancellor's Office
PREM, Files of the Prime Minister's Office
T, Treasury files
TS, Treasury Solicitor files

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