

Yesterday.....

A Classless Society: Britain in the 1990s

Alwyn W. Turner

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Dan Atkinson

The author once worked in an Army cinema, operating the film projector. Reading this tremendous book, you wonder if he may not have been better employed behind the movie camera. His wide lens misses little and his superb technique gives real depth to the picture.

Just out of shot, either side of the frame, are the two landmark events that (to mix metaphors) bookend Mr Turner's narrative. By chance, the dates of both events would be rendered as 'nine-eleven' in the continents in which they took place, respectively November 9 1989, when the Berlin Wall came down, and September 11 2001, with the attacks on New York and Washington.

So this is a social history of Britain during not only the first post-Cold War decade but also (to date) the most hopeful. There was to be a 'new world order', supervised by technocratic institutions run by experts (independent central banks, environmental supervisors, competition regulators and so forth). 'We know what works,' the first President Bush declared in his 1989 inaugural speech. 'Freedom works. We know what's right: Freedom is right. We know how to secure a more just and prosperous life for man on Earth: through free markets, free speech, free elections, and the exercise of free will unhampered by the state.'

This sense of having 'cracked it', of having resolved all the messy arguments of the past, permeated the Nineties, just one of the ways in which it resembled the Fifties, with be-suited politicians meeting in assorted cities to sign up for new

institutions and initiatives to embed what were believed to be eternal truths: the Maastricht Treaty (1992), the World Trade Organisation (1995), the establishment of the International Criminal Court (1998), the launch of the euro (1999).

Another echo of Fifties could be heard in the sometimes regretful, sometimes celebratory view that the big political and social struggles were now behind us. Of the earlier decade, Neil Ascherson once recalled:

'When I finished my National Service and went to Cambridge, the voices around and above me were saying something like this: "History is over. After a million years, the human race has arrived at its destination. We have finally discovered how to run things. There will be no more revolutions, no more slumps and booms....You may find this dull. You may hanker after romantic periods....But all that is over. There is Keynes, there is the National Health Service, there is Bretton Woods which has stabilised the world economy for ever. If you want excitement, concentrate on your personal relationships.'¹

That was the Nineties all over. Passion was for the arts, for sport, for cooking, for romance, even for interior design or gardening. For single issues, perhaps: against global warming and testing on animals, in favour of a fair shake for disabled people or the release of wrongly convicted prisoners. But not for politics in general. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the decade saw a trend for professional politicians habitually to declare their passion for opera, or football, or indeed both.

This is also the story of the first post-Cold War Prime Minister, John Major (now Sir John). He took office just a few days after the signing of the Peace of Paris, which ended the east-west struggle and ushered in what Philip Bobbitt has called 'the market state'.² Indeed, Major's predecessor, Margaret Thatcher, was in the French capital for this event when she heard she had failed convincingly to see off the

1 'The Nostalgia Game', article first published 1986, republished in his *Games with Shadows* (Radius, 1988)

2 *The Shield of Achilles* (Penguin, 2002)

leadership challenge from Michael Heseltine of which Major proved to be the ultimate beneficiary.

Major himself would have been there, as Foreign Secretary, had Thatcher not lost her Chancellor, Nigel Lawson, just over a year earlier, prompting her to move Major to the Treasury. As Mr Turner notes, Major had been put through something of 'a crash course in statesmanship'. He adds:

'The implausibility of his rise helped create an image of accidental premiership that he never quite threw off. As Prime Minister, he served for longer than, say, Clement Attlee, David Lloyd George or Edward Heath, longer than James Callaghan and Neville Chamberlain put together and just a few months shy of Harold Macmillan, yet he made less impression than any of those figures even at the time.'

A fair point, although his elevation to the premiership certainly had Labour rattled, rightly as it turned out on election night two years later. 'The Conservatives have found their Attlee,' said Lord (Douglas) Jay at the time in my hearing, a statement given some weight by his having served as a Treasury Minister under Labour's first post-war premier.

Major enjoyed not one but two periods of extraordinarily high approval ratings. The first followed his arrival in office, the second his surprise general election victory in April 1992. Between the two peaks was a deep valley of unpopularity, occasioned by the second Tory recession in a dozen years. As Mr Turner notes: '[T]he assumption was that Labour were the favourites to win.'

Well, indeed. The Tories were fighting on far more hostile terrain than five years earlier, when tax rates had been falling and Britain was booming. In fact, the economy in downbeat 1992 was the same size as it had been in go-go 1987; the trouble was that it had been larger in the interim.

The failure of Labour leader Neil Kinnock to dislodge the Conservatives has been not so much raked over in the intervening years as subjected to prairie-style agriculture, complete with heavy machinery and crop-spraying aircraft.

Wisely, Mr Turner keeps the post-mortem tight. The Sheffield rally did not help, he suggests, but ultimately, despite everything that had happened, voters still seemed overall not to trust Labour with the economy.

I would add a couple of points.

One, with Labour committed to higher taxes and continued membership of the European Exchange-rate Mechanism (which was keeping interest rates high) the voter had a choice between lower taxes and higher borrowing costs or higher taxes and higher borrowing costs.

Two, plenty of people liked Kinnock not because he was promising radical change (he wasn't by 1992) but rather because he seemed a decent, middle-class man with a nice family. Unfortunately, exactly same thing could be said about the new-ish Tory leader. In terms of evoking a relaxed, sport-loving, pub-visiting, drink-before-Sunday-lunch yesteryear – at which Thatcher would have been hopeless even assuming she would have tried – the two leaders were evenly matched.

The really intriguing What if? relates to Kinnock's successor, John Smith. I was one of his Town neighbours at the Barbican and recall the television cameras outside Bart's hospital the morning he died in May 1994. Smith's death catapulted him instantly into the pantheon of 'greatest prime ministers we never had'. Perhaps. But had he trounced Major at the polls (a big supposition, given Smith's self-satisfied persona and apparent belief that the English were naturally more selfish than his fellow Scots), Major may have been well-advised to put in a tour of duty as leader of the opposition, with every chance of a return to Downing Street.

Internationally, the statesman Major most closely resembled was George Bush, US president from 1989 to 1993. Bush's patrician background was far removed from Major's humble roots, but both succeeded more vivid, charismatic and 'crunchy' leaders, both enjoyed early popularity, both suffered from a feeling among their own supporters that they were not fully up to the job and both were ousted by younger, flashier rivals from the centre-left – more centre than left in both cases – who had realised the game had changed. And

both, in their day, were half-decent phrasemakers – or employed people who were.

Hence Bush's *bon mots* included 'a kinder, gentler America', 'a thousands points of light' (a reference to charitable giving and social involvement), 'a line in the sand' (with reference to the 1991 invasion of Kuwait), 'go the extra mile for peace' (ahead of the 1991 Gulf War) and 'read my lips – no new taxes'.

From Major we had 'if it isn't hurting it isn't working' (his declaration as Chancellor that ERM membership would be painful but worth it), 'game, set and match' (with regard to his Maastricht negotiations), 'the United Kingdom is in danger. Wake up. Wake up now before it's too late' (with regard to Labour plans for Scottish home rule in the 1992 election), 'a nation at ease with itself' and *ca va sans dire* 'a classless society'.

Major's post-election second honeymoon, in which television cameras at cricket grounds would swing round to disclose a relaxed Prime Minister sipping a glass of wine in a hospitality box, was glorious while it lasted. The month after they repelled Kinnock's forces, the Tories inflicted a second defeat on Labour at the local government elections. Tory elation was the mirror-image of despair on the left.

As Mr Turner writes:

'If the Tories couldn't be defeated in the depths of a recession caused by their own policies, with all the concessions made by Kinnock, then it was reasonable to ask the question put by Giles Radice: "Can Labour ever win?"

Much the talk in political circles concerned the question of whether Britain might have become a one-party state, along the lines of Japan, where the Liberal Democratic Party had been in power since 1955.'

There used to be a wisecrack along the lines of there having doubtless been an international summit to discuss the enormous problem of the dinosaurs – on the Thursday before the dinosaurs became extinct. Much the same could be said

about fears of a one-party Conservative quasi-dictatorship. Before too long, the notion would be laughable.

Maastricht

In early June, the Danes stunned the European political establishment by voting in a referendum against the Maastricht Treaty, signed earlier in the year and providing for both political union (enhanced defence, security and other co-operation) and monetary union, the creation of a single currency, unnamed at that time. Giving the lie to the idea that the European Community was essentially a Cold War institution, Maastricht was a big step towards the *finalité politique*.

Were Major to boycott Lurpak and Carlsberg for the rest of his life, you could hardly blame him. The Danish 'No' wounded his premiership from two directions. One, Maastricht had been presented as a triumph for the new premier, in which he had obtained concessions from Brussels that would have eluded even Thatcher. His patient courtesy (went the spin) had secured British 'opt-outs' (strictly speaking 'opt-ins') from two key developments, the 'social chapter' (assorted workplace and other entitlements) and the single currency. (Ironically, Major's Maastricht achievement was genuine. Never before had the six/nine/ten/twelve member-states failed to sign up to everything together. Indeed, Major's opt-outs were the template for the four subsequent Denmark-specific opt-outs that persuaded the Danes to vote 'Yes' a second time round).

Two, the Danish 'No' spooked the currency markets, which smelled weakness in terms of ERM members' commitment to stick to the policies needed to stay within the currency grid. Given that the ERM was essentially a Deutschesmark bloc, the high German interest rates caused by the reunion with East Germany – which had stoked inflation – were transmitted, painfully, to the rest of the ERM area.

Throughout the heavy summer of 1992, speculative attacks against the system increased and on September 13 Italy staged a seven per cent devaluation of the Lira, way

outside the permitted 'divergences'. Three days later, Sterling was forced out of the system by an unstoppable wave of speculation.

This need not have become an albatross round the government's neck. The wound could have been cauterised by the swift departure of Major's Chancellor, the Shetland Islander Norman Lamont. In the fashion of the future (David Blunkett, Peter Mandelson) he could have returned to high office before too long. Instead he stayed in post until May 1993, when Major fired him. It was the beginning of Major's agonies in terms of reaping the consequences of flawed political management.

Lamont subsequently let it be known that he had never agreed with the ERM policy. But which ERM policy? Or rather, which motive for joining the ERM? For every Tory MP who cheered British membership in autumn 1990 as a sign that the UK was becoming 'more positive about Europe', there were at least two for whom membership was simply the latest stage in the Tories' 20-year battle to 'discipline' trade union wage bargaining, this time via a purgative interest-rate policy outsourced to the Germans. New Labour, of course, was to find a different way of doing this, through mass immigration.

Mr Turner writes of the ERM debacle: 'Even if other countries got caught up in the near-collapse of the ERM, however, it was John Major's bad luck to be the first and most visible fall guy.'

In parallel, the Danish vote reopened the whole question of Maastricht, given that, technically, the treaty was now dead. This was the last thing Major needed, given that his Maastricht triumph had satisfied both pro and anti camps in his party and an unravelling of Maastricht would have the opposite effect.

Europe was to be the British political issue of the Nineties, just as the surprise economic recovery was to be the economic issue. Thus the bitter battles about European Union integration were waged against an incongruous background of falling unemployment, gently rising living standards and a population becoming more gregarious, easy-going and

bourgeois.

For the proponents of Britain 'at the heart of Europe', the great hope was that the return to prosperity would quell doubts about further British involvement, as a more secure population would ignore the 'wild men' whom Britain's EU lobby assumed to comprise the opposition. Indeed, for most of the decade, the 'pro' camp seemed to hold most of the cards and boast the better spokespeople. Major's Chancellor Kenneth Clarke could make a united Europe sound as British as roast beef and brown ale, Major's deputy Michael Heseltine gave it the aura of an exciting business enterprise and Tony Blair bestowed upon the project the glitter of a chic and fashionable new international club that Britain would be crazy not to join.

The first task of the pro-Europeans was to get Britain to sign up for the euro. There seemed an air of inevitability about their eventual triumph. But three people played a key role in keeping Britain out of the single currency: Sir James Goldsmith, William Hague and, after the end of this book, Iain Duncan Smith. Goldsmith's Referendum Party forced all the main parties to promise the people a vote on joining the euro, while Hague and Duncan Smith blocked the possibility of getting all the party leaders on the 'yes' bandwagon, as had happened in 1975.

Gordon Brown's famous 'tests' played a subsidiary, although important, role.

In the end, Blair lacked the nerve to call a vote.

Mr Turner is acute in his observations of the Labour leader: 'Unlike Bill Clinton, he was not a charismatic figure, but had learnt the trick of behaving as if he were.' As for comparisons between Blair and Thatcher, there was 'a critical difference':

'Certainly Blair was prepared to take his party in unfamiliar and unloved directions, but it was always in pursuit of a wider popularity, whereas Thatcher had imposed unwelcome and difficult changes both on her party and on the country itself.'

Blair's victory and the public response to the death four months later of the Princess of Wales marked perhaps the starting point for two phenomena: the new state ideology and the new folk religion. The former, as I and my co-author wrote at the time,³ involved privatising the economy and nationalising the public, with ever-greater state intrusion into people's private lives deemed desirable, nay essential; while the latter expressed itself in public displays of emotion, the leaving of flowers by scenes of disasters and 'showing respect', often in quite bizarre ways – every Premier League fixture held a moment's silence before the game to remember victims of the Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan in March 2011. The state ideology and the folk religion sometimes overlapped subconsciously in the public mind, as in this splendid vignette from Mr Turner from shortly after the 1997 election :

'Giles Radice [MP] was surprised to be visited at his constituency surgery by a woman who "complains that we haven't yet managed to 'change people's behaviour towards each other' and asks what I am going to do about it.'"

Public life in the late nineties was, in one way, quite extraordinarily trivial, whether the sex scandals in Britain, chronicled fairly by Mr Turner, or the 'burning question' of whether or not President Clinton had discharged over a work-experience trainee's dress.

Even when matters were serious, the response managed not to be so. Here is journalist and future Labour MP Sion Simon writing in *The Daily Telegraph* on December 21 1998 after joint US-British bombing raids on Iraq. In the course of this action (the little-remembered engagement was called Operation Desert Fox), more cruise missiles were fired in four days than in the entire 1991 Gulf War:

'That evening, I went to a party at 1 Carlton Gardens, the Foreign Secretary's House. He had been expected to say a few words, but failed to do so because of the war. And that was the extent of the impact of events in the

³ *The Age of Insecurity* (Verso, 1998)

Persian Gulf. Although British airmen were in combat as we sipped our champagne, missiles wreaking havoc as we gulped our canapés, nobody was talking about Iraq....The only comment I have heard anyone make about the bombardment is how amusing would be the conjunction of a Tomahawk cruise missile and Richard Branson's balloon.'

In August 1999, a boatload of celebrities was ferried to Liberty Island for the launch of Tina Brown's new magazine *Talk*. According to the *Daily Mail* on August 4: 'Film stars Demi Moore and Christopher Walken stood together looking across to Manhattan, and Moore said: "We must look wonderful to all the people over there.'" A mere 25 months later, New York was reeling and the heroes were fire-fighters and rescue workers rather than screen stars and models.

The 'new economy'

As the new century approached, the economic and social trends of the nineties – in particular, the 'new economy' of the internet, a 'weightless world' in which value would be generated by ideas, designs and 'creativity' – reached their apogee in the dot-com boom, during which it seemed any half-plausible group of young people could raise tens of millions of pounds or dollars from investors provided their supposed businesses could boast some connection with the world wide web. One of many new phrases in the air at that time was 'burn rate', meaning the speed at which these bright young things would spend their way through their backers' initial investment before they would require 'refinancing'.

Tales abounded of funky, inflatable boardrooms, of corporate HQs jammed full of pinball tables, espresso machines, bean bags, designer beer and organic nibbles. 'Think pods' allowed this new digital elite to engage in 'blue skies thinking'.

Some smelled a rat, detecting in all this emphasis on boozing, munching and horizontal daydreaming nothing very 'new economy' at all, rather the time-hallowed behaviour of

the public-school layabout.

The dot.com boom went smash in the early part of 2000. Absurd valuations collapsed, and a string of (briefly) famous names disappeared: boo.com, clickmango and others. Wrote BBC business reporter Jorn Madslien on March 9 2010:

'How we all laugh as we look back at a time when the talk was more important than the walk, and when scruffy entrepreneurs were courted by greedy venture capitalists, their ties hidden in their pockets.'

The crash was even more severe on Wall Street, and in an ominous foretaste of what was to come, the Federal Reserve Board (whose chairman Alan Greenspan was at the peak of his 'genius' status) responded by slashing borrowing costs, thus rolling the indebtedness problem over from the corporate sector to the housing market. As we know, it came to rest on the books of sovereign governments some years down the road.

But if the dot-com bubble burst, the underlying belief that the future lay in a 'creative economy' merely grew stronger as Britons were urged to 'climb the value chain' and leave boring, repetitive work to people in 'the emerging markets' (as the Third World had been rebranded). This was a neat inversion of the Victorian line that westerners were practical and technical while those in the 'mysterious orient' were impractical dreamers who were quite good at making fancy carpets but not much else. Now, the poorly-paid foreigners were the dull drones of manufacturing industry while our work was naturally more imaginative, valuable and intelligent. Thus the 'creative economy' was one example of supposedly progressive thinking that could be seen in quite a different light.

Another example arose from changing attitudes to homosexuality. Mr Turner is very good on the grief that this caused the Conservative Party. He is also gently amusing, as in this passage about a vote in Parliament to lower the age of consent for gay men from 21 to 18:

'[H]ome Secretary Michael Howard....explained that he

couldn't go any further because "We need to protect young men from activities which their lack of maturity might case them to regret." As an aspiration for legislators, that seemed a trifle ambitious.'

The eviction from adults' bedrooms of policemen and officials is always welcome. But by the end of the Nineties, the attitude of a straight person to the gay community had become almost the acid test of personal decency, and pretty much remains so today. If I were gay, I think I should find this somewhat problematic. It comes perilously close to suggesting that any heterosexual person with the moral grit and determination to overcome a 'natural' revulsion in this area and extend the hand of friendship is indeed a thoroughly good sort.

Mr Turner has been criticised in some quarters for giving what is seen as excessive weight to the doings of light entertainers; one reviewer suggested he ought to have cited fewer comedians and more sociologists. Not only does the heart sink at the prospect of latter-day Howard Kirk characters clogging up Mr Turner's narrative, but in an age of pointless, pre-packaged political speeches and the triumph of government-as-public-relations, the appearance of new, apolitical comedians such as Jack Dee, a married, churchgoing self-described 'middle class binge drinker' with children at independent schools is more significant than, for example, a Tony Blair speech about 'cracking down on yobs'.

True, Mr Turner's fascination with the currents and countercurrents of the last three decades leads him very occasionally to assume experience on the part of the readers that they simply may not have. Discussing the 'new lads' of this period, he doubtless correctly traces the phenomenon's roots to a reaction against the undergraduate feminism of the 1980s. Those of us who skipped university and went straight out to work by-passed the 'gender wars' of that period (when I get a moment, I must find out who won) and simply assumed the 'new lads' were suffering from arrested development.

But all authors have a viewpoint and over-strenuous attempts to see things from all angles would lead to madness.

What has been described as the 'long weekend'

between 1989 and 2001 came to an end in flames and falling masonry three months after Blair was re-elected in June 2001. The September 11 attacks were rather like the Cuban missile crisis, the building of the Berlin Wall and the murder of President Kennedy all rolled into one. While in many ways the noughties (up until 2008) represented the continuation of the nineties by other means, the innocent delight in the post-Cold War era, captured in those floaty Millennial expressions – ‘a borderless world’, ‘cyberspace’, ‘globalisation’ – had been replaced by an accommodation with grimmer expressions such as ‘homeland security’, ‘regime change’ and ‘the war on terror’. The new decade was to be marked by military campaigns abroad and a credit binge at home. By 2010, it had long since become obvious that both had gone disastrously wrong.

I very much hope, despite hints to the contrary, that Mr Turner addresses that extraordinary period. Should he decline the assignment, I may be forced to take it up myself. I tell you now, it would not be done a quarter as well.

Dan Atkinson’s most recent book (with Larry Elliott) is
Going South (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

He blogs at

<<http://blogs.thisismoney.co.uk/author-dan-atkinson/>>.