

All In It Together: England in the early 21st Century

Alwyn Turner

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On March 20 1976, in the immediate wake of Harold Wilson's resignation as Prime Minister and Labour leader, Margaret Thatcher told the Conservative Central Council about 'a little piece of advice' she had given him the previous week.

'Go' I said, 'and go now'.

'It's always gratifying to be listened to.'

Reviewing Alwyn Turner's book on Britain in the 1990s, *A Classless Society* in 2013,¹ I ended by urging the author, 'despite hints to the contrary' to turn his attention to the years that followed. He has now done so. It's always gratifying to be . . . but you know how this ends.

All In It Together marks a slight change of format, in that the narrative ranges not over a single decade but roughly over the first 15 or 16 years of this century. This makes a lot of sense, as the alternative, presumably, would have been to claim that the 2010 election marked some sort of watershed, dividing the Labour years of plenty from the Coalition's austerity. That's not a bad notion necessarily, but it rather ignores the fact that the Coalition's Chancellor, George Osborne, in the end followed similar policies to those that would have guided his Labour predecessor, Alistair Darling.

Anyway, Mr Turner has bigger fish to fry than simply economic and fiscal policy. An alternative title for this ambitious and excellent book might have referred to 'The Return and Decline of Polite Society' across a decade and a half; and the parallel reversal of fortune for those 'plausible young men' who rose to the top of that society – Nick Clegg, David Cameron, Ed Miliband, David Miliband and the *primus inter plausibiles*, Tony Blair.

'This was very much the modern trend: educated, metropolitan,

¹ <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster66/lob66-classless-society.pdf>>

middle-class young men with a plausible, unstuffy manner and a promise of managerial competence.'

Close to the start of the book, a rather less plausible young man, Conservative leader William Hague, was scythed down in the 2001 election, four months before the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington. All Hague's efforts had come pretty much to nothing – the Tories made a net gain of just one seat, and Labour's majority was, as it had been in 1997, larger than the entire Parliamentary Conservative Party.

In the run-up to the poll, some Conservatives had feared the result could be even worse.

'In the event, it wasn't that bad but it was still awful, worse even than in 1997, since it made clear that last time had been no isolated accident.'

In retrospect, Summer 2001 may have been the zenith of the plausible young men and their polite society of people holding what are known as 'high status opinions'. At that time they were such notions as the inevitability of Britain joining the euro, the 'need' for more university graduates and the importance of 'tackling obesity' – that last one usually framed as a condition of working class people in need of remedial treatment by their social betters. But their reign crumbled only slowly, rather as the 1903 Delhi Durbar, a powerful but misleading display of supposed British might in India, came more than 40 years before the country's actual independence.

At the far end of the book, polite society and the plausibles are heading for the biggest shock of their lives – the result of the June 2016 referendum on membership of the European Union. To a man they had supported the Remain cause. In 2001, New Labour, the ultimate plausibles party, had won a second landslide in four years. Now, Tony Blair and his imitators in other parties could not even win the popular vote in a referendum that would surely have been a walkover 16 years earlier, had there been one on Britain joining the Euro. But the vote in 2016, remember, was not about joining the single currency; it was about whether or not to leave a bloc of which Britain had been a member for 43 years – and which it had tried to join for more than ten years before that.

What had happened in the intervening time? The short answer is 'plenty', from paedophile scandals to allowance-fiddling by MPs, but Mr Turner's first chapter is entitled 'peace and war' so let us start with that topic. From the Falkland Islands in 1982 (and for those in the know, the

Oman campaign from 1970 to 1976) right up to the early successes of the 2001 Afghanistan invasion, Britain's armed forces had been on a winning streak, taking in the 1991 Gulf War, Bosnia, Kosovo and Sierra Leone.

Among large sections of the population, when Our Boys went into action, the only argument was over just how glorious their victory would be. The period in question ended that illusion, chiefly, although not entirely, because of Iraq.

'Had the UK's involvement in the War on Terror, as America designated its response to 9/11, been restricted to Afghanistan, it would – despite the lengthy engagement – have had little purchase on the popular imagination. But there was also Iraq.'

The author adds:

'[I]n their first telephone conversation after the [September 11] attacks, [President George] Bush told Blair his targets were, first, [Osama] bin Laden and then "other countries, including Iraq".'

There follows a delightful description of the period that followed.

'The international negotiations in the 18 months between that call and the onset of hostilities on March 19 2003 resembled at times an intricate dance routine choreographed on the spur of the moment by its principals, with a supporting cast of weapons inspectors, dodgy dossiers and UN resolutions. The ending was clear enough, though. War was coming. Not just another bombing campaign, but a full-scale invasion of Iraq.'

Iraq, of course, was to prove far more controversial domestically than had Afghanistan. There were huge demonstrations on the eve of battle, at a time when it was still assumed that Britain would be playing a key role in what would prove a famous US-led victory. Indeed, there were fears that Blair would use success in the military sphere to persuade Britain to sign up to the euro; on the basis that he had made one correct judgment and could be trusted to make another.

As it was, what amounted to defeat for Britain (combined with the failure to find any of the 'weapons of mass destruction' that had been used to justify the invasion) tainted Iraq irredeemably in the public mind.

Back home, the political scene is viewed through the lens less of the big parties and of 'Westminster bubble' stories than by telling the stories of the gadfly movements such as George Galloway's Respect and UKIP. In this last regard, Nigel Farage obviously looms large, but did you remember that Robert Kilroy-Silk, like Galloway a former Labour MP and a future reality TV star, served as a UKIP MEP?

'[Both] earned more from the media than from politics and had a taste for the good life, though Galloway's holiday home was in Portugal, not Spain.'

In their different ways, both parties were worming away beneath the apparently solid foundations of the polite society. Yet above the surface, this structure seemed here to stay, as shown in a number of observations by the author.

On graduates in comedy:

'In addition to their educational role, universities passed on orthodox values of liberal decency. In the context of comedy, a degree certificate was a licence to laugh at taboos, because it proved you knew why those taboos were important and could be trusted to place an ironic fig leaf over the offending areas.'

On non-graduate comedian Roy 'Chubby' Brown:

'Like Bernard Manning, he was simply not acceptable in polite society.'

On audiences cheering Brown's remarks on asylum seekers:

'And he was quite clear he meant what he said in his act: "behind every joke a comedian makes, there's a serious point". The roar of approval was also the sound of the audience registering their acknowledgement of that serious point. There's no joke without fire.'

On State interference in private life:

'No matter how much we prided ourselves on being more tolerant than previous generations, there was a fear in polite society that we were not to be trusted, that the old evils still lay within us. Constant vigilance was required, and government, councils and police felt obliged to monitor what had once been private behaviour. The principle of inclusion demanded the practice of intrusion.'

Also:

'[T]he Sure Start programme and the greater funding of childcare and nursery places increased the State's involvement in the rearing of children.'

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the reappearance, albeit in modern guise, of polite society was accompanied by a resurgence in the acceptability of poshness. Tony Blair, the first privately educated Prime Minister since Alec Douglas-Home, played down the fact. David Cameron, Nick Clegg, Boris

Johnson and others didn't really bother, and it appeared to do them little harm.

But then, the British during the period in question seemed to take a broad-brush approach to notions of class and classlessness:

'In April 2011, 30 years on from the fairy-tale wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer that so enchanted the nation, the couple's first-born son, William, married Kate Middleton, and the nation was enthralled again. The narrative was irresistible: here was the second in line to the throne marrying a commoner, a woman whose mother had been an air hostess; the Daily Express was not alone in seeing the story of "an ordinary girl marrying a prince as the ultimate victory of the classless, mobile society". Kate wasn't actually common in the sense that common people understood the term – her father's family had known royalty for generations, and she had been privately educated at Marlborough – but still it was a lovely fantasy.'

Key to the problems of polite society in the 15 years after 2001 were three factors: the September 11 attacks, and subsequent wars; the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent Great Recession; the betrayals and evasions over Europe by the political class.

Mr Turner reminds us of a particularly egregious example of this last factor. David Cameron, then leader of the opposition, had given a 'cast-iron guarantee' of a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty – which was the European Constitution re-packaged so as to avoid public votes.

'By the time he became Prime Minister, however, the Lisbon Treaty was a fait accompli, all signed and ratified, and he'd already ruled out a retrospective referendum. The guarantee wasn't worth the scrap iron it was cast in.'

Much the same could be said about Cameron's pledge that 'treaty change' would emerge from his re-negotiation of Britain's EU membership ahead of the referendum.

The chapter on the financial crisis is excellent and fast-moving:

'It was the end of the long boom . . . there was a bitter, lingering taste of injustice. Bankers had engaged in wildly speculative and dangerous practices, and when it had all gone wrong, the taxpayer was left to foot the bill.'

Reading this book, there were times when I felt chastened by ignorance of chunks of popular culture since the turn of the century. But more chastening by far was exposure of memory deficiencies. I had long

attributed any success as a journalist to never throwing anything away, in terms of useful documents, and never forgetting anything.

Alas, I seem to have forgotten a lot: Tony Blair's frank dialogue with Sharron Storer concerning the inadequacies of the NHS, Ann Cryer MP's central role in exposing grooming gangs of child abusers, the scale of the destruction of property in the 2011 riots. I'm happy to say Mr Turner hasn't.

It could well be that a loss of faith and trust in the people and institutions that managed early 21st Century British society undermined the position of those at the top between 2000 and 2016. However, a cross-current identified in this book shows that, even had the public complete confidence in the integrity of those in charge, it may be that a large proportion simply did not share the objectives of the political class.

For many, the simpler pleasures trumped the prospect of Britain 'punching above its weight on the world stage' every time:

'Middle England, the realm of Classic FM, the National Trust and the Mail on Sunday, was alive and well.'

Mr Turner adds that, back in 1972, Alf Garnett had suggested England 'ought to retire . . . sit back and put our feet up'.

'He exaggerated for comic effect, but the underlying attitude was much heard on radio phone-in shows in the 21st Century. The idea of withdrawing a little from the world, of doing some basic housekeeping, was shared by those who opposed the invasion of Iraq and by those who opposed foreign aid.'

There is a hint right at the end that the failures of the political class and polite society may actually have given the voters the self-confidence to back their hunches, most spectacularly in the EU referendum.

'People wanted to be involved, to be consulted, as demonstrated in the high level of participation in the Scottish referendum. But on the biggest issues of the day – especially the war in Iraq and immigration – no-one seemed interested in their opinion.'

Which was curious, given the sounder judgments of the public as opposed to those of their betters.

'This was despite the people having a decent track record: their scepticism on Iraq and their distrust of the single currency had surely been vindicated.'

And so say all of us.

Dan Atkinson's most recent book, with Larry Elliott, is Europe Didn't Work (Yale University Press; 2017).

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