

Historical Notes on Tom Nairn and the British State

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Nairn and Marx

Tom Nairn, who died in January, was one of the most powerful and perceptive political theorists of our time. He was a Marxian whose writings often appeared in journals such as *New Left Review* and *The London Review of Books*, as well as in books such as *The Break-Up of Britain* (1977, 1981, 2021), *The Enchanted Glass* (1989, 2011) and *After Britain* (2003). During the 1960s he had developed in conjunction with Perry Anderson what became known as the 'Nairn-Anderson thesis' on British development. This located the roots of the modern British State in the 'phoney' 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688. It was an argument which frequently offended the orthodox¹ but also influenced a number of modern British historians and writers, such as Neal Ascherson, Anthony Barnett, Gavin Esler, Christopher Harvie, P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, as well as the author of this essay.² He has been called 'the godfather of Scottish nationalism'³ and played a critical part in the construction of the

¹ Neal Ascherson, 'On Tom Nairn', *London Review of Books*, vol. 45, no. 4, 16 February 2023, p. 12. See also Anthony Barnett, 'Deciding Britain's Future: Tom Nairn, Gordon Brown, Marxism and Nationalism', *Open Democracy*, 30 January, 2022, <<https://tinyurl.com/yan34ezz>> or <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/scottish-independence-tom-nairn-gordon-brown/>>. The 'Nairn-Anderson thesis' can be found in, for example, Perry Anderson, 'Origins of the Present Crisis' and Tom Nairn, 'The British Political Elite', both in *New Left Review* 23 (1964).

² See for example, Neal Ascherson, *Tom Nairn: Painting Nationalism Red?* (Edinburgh: Democratic Left Scotland, 2018); Gavin Esler, *How Britain Ends: English Nationalism and the Rebirth of Four Nations* (London: Head of Zeus, 2021); Christopher Harvey, *Broonland: The Last Days of Gordon Brown* (London: Verso, 2010); Scott Newton and Dilwyn Porter, *Modernization Frustrated* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988 and Scott Newton *The Reinvention of Britain 1960-2016. A Political and Economic History* (London: Routledge, 2017); Barnett's introduction to the 2021 edition of Nairn's *Break-Up of Britain* <<https://www.versobooks.com/books/3748-the-break-up-of-britain>> and P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism 1688-2015*, 3rd edition (London: Routledge, 2016).

³ See Gianni Martini, 'Godfather of modern Scottish independence movement Tom Nairn dies', <<https://tinyurl.com/ys25d3jb>> or <<https://news.stv.tv/scotland/godfather-of-modern-scottish-independence-movement-tom-nairn-dies>>.

progressive, civic nationalism underpinning the philosophy and programme of the contemporary SNP. It was a position which led him to support calls for the dissolution of the United Kingdom, and its replacement by some sort of confederation or co-operative association between the old member nations.

Nairn wrote from a Marxist perspective, reckoning that Marx may have been right about the development of human society and about the nature and role of capitalism and its social consequences, but that his work contained two important blind spots. In pinpointing these he drew on his understanding of the work of the Italian Marxist political philosopher, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), which had discussed the concept of hegemony and the role played by ideology in generating popular consent to this. First of all, Marx had failed to understand Britain, the pioneer of industrial capitalism and (ironically) the nation where he lived the greater part of his life and produced most of his best work. Marx had maintained that mid-nineteenth century Britain was run by the bourgeoisie which had transformed the country into the world's first industrial nation, pioneers of a new era in world history. He argued that the process which had occurred in Britain was already starting to spread throughout the world: landlordism was in retreat as industrial capital and its owners and functionaries were accumulating wealth and power in Europe and the United States.

Britain's *ancien régime*

Marx appreciated that on the surface it did not look as if the industrial bourgeoisie were in charge of the British State. He noted that from the time of the successful 'Glorious Revolution' against James II in 1688, political and economic power resided in an alliance between the financial and landed grandees at the core of the English ruling class. The Revolution was in essence a highly successful bid by this group, later known as the Whig oligarchy, to frustrate what were seen as James' ambitions to return the country to Catholicism and build an absolute monarchy similar to the one evident in the France of Louis XIV. The Whigs used the power they won through what was essentially a *coup d'état* to build the Empire and enormously expand their own fortunes in the process. They dominated governments, challenged only by another significant group of aristocrats, the Tories, who tended to have fewer connections to the commercial and banking world of the City of London and whose wealth was rooted more in agriculture, rural Britain and the 'squireocracy'. Even in the 1850s, the aristocracy enjoyed 'exclusive power in Parliament, in the Civil Service, in the Army and the Navy and . . .

. is thus one half, and comparatively the most important one, of the British nation'.⁴ But the appearance was deceptive. Marx argued that measures such as the 1832 Reform Act, the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, the 1846 repeal of the Corn Laws and the 1853 introduction of Succession Duty on Landed Property, showed that 'Legislative history since 1831' was 'the history of concessions made to the industrial bourgeoisie', which thus 'gained general *political* recognition as the *ruling class*'.⁵ The industrial bourgeoisie pulled the strings of political power even though the aristocracy continued in office. It was an alliance of convenience between the two against the new working class, built on a shared fear of proletarian uprisings.

Nairn agreed that the Glorious Revolution of 1688 was a critical juncture in English history, and that it led to the empowerment of the Whig oligarchy, an *ancien regime* which established the sovereignty not of the Crown but of the *Crown-in-Parliament*. Although the coup which brought the Whigs to power was based on the forcible ejection of James II from the throne, it required political and constitutional legitimacy, which was provided by the 1689 Bill of Rights. The Bill, which became the foundation document of the modern English, and subsequently British State, had three key functions. The first established the political supremacy of elected Parliaments where freedom of speech was protected and whose approval was required before taxes could be levied. The second reinforced both the 1628 Petition of Right and the 1679 Habeas Corpus Act, in the process strengthening the rights of the individual in the face of State power. The third barred Catholics from the throne, which appears a good deal less liberal to contemporary generations than the first two parts; but to those who drafted it the measure was rooted in the conviction that Catholicism, absolutism and oppression were all of a piece. Nairn has argued that the passing of the Bill of Rights certainly established the powerful notion that the 'rights of the Englishman' were legally guaranteed, through formal constitutional means which were not to be found elsewhere; but at the same time it protected the autonomy, property and commercial wealth of the Whig landowning and financial aristocracy. This was the class which, in passing the 1707 Act of Union between England and Scotland, created the Great Britain of modern history – also known by Nairn as 'Ukania' (after 'Kakania', the name given by Robert Musil to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, another backward-

⁴ Karl Marx, 'The British Constitution', in *Surveys from Exile*, edited by David Fernbach (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 282.

⁵ Marx (see note 4) Emphasis in the original.

looking multinational state, in his unfinished 1943 novel *The Man Without Qualities*).

The new State was formed both to safeguard and to expand, by force if necessary, the extensive economic interests of the Whigs. These were based on large landed estates at home, plantations in the Americas and the revenue generated by the Atlantic slave trade and the cultivation of immensely profitable business networks throughout India and South Asia. Nairn argued that it was at root an 'Anglo-British' union, with political power centred in London and wealth disproportionately concentrated in Southern England. A persistent bias towards expansion overseas in search of commercial opportunity, leading to conflicts with other nations which had also acquired significant external connections (especially France), was central to the make-up of this Great Britain, which pursued its mission so successfully that by the time it defeated the French in the Seven Years' War (1756-63), it had established a global empire.

The City of London, which had grown dramatically with the formation of the National Debt and the creation of the Bank of England in 1694, mobilised credit for these wars. It also provided banking, shipping and insurance facilities for the British traders, plantation owners and members of Chartered Companies who, by the time of Napoleon's defeat in 1815 dominated world commerce, recycling their wealth through their landed estates and an international financial system centred on London. Imperialism, the pursuit of overseas trade and investment, and a readiness to go to war, backed by the possession of overwhelming maritime power, were built into the DNA of the post-1688 British State at the moment of its creation and have remained there ever since.

Nairn disagreed with Marx's view that the bourgeoisie were the real masters in post-1850 Britain. He argued that the Whig landowning and mercantile oligarchy continued to exercise hegemony over Britain notwithstanding the coming of the industrial revolution and the growth of the working class. The *ancien régime* formed an alliance with the industrial bourgeoisie strong enough to frustrate working class political organisations such as the Chartists, which attracted mass support and had by the 1840s developed radical programmes designed to transfer political power to working people. They demanded annual Parliaments, with equal electoral districts, and with members elected by universal male suffrage through the secret ballot. MPs would no longer be required to meet a property qualification and they would be salaried. Although Chartist demands were met, with the exception of annual Parliaments, the process took decades. It was not until 1914 that all males over 21 won

the right to vote in general elections. This process of painstaking gradual reform over the best part of seven decades, also visible in the recognition of trade union rights, ensured the survival of the old oligarchy through the piecemeal accommodation of working class pressure within a political and social order it continued to dominate.

Nairn was clear that the priorities of this elite determined both external strategy and the shape of the society whose interests that strategy was designed to promote. This was, and remains, hierarchical, with sharp geographical, political, cultural and economic divisions. Nairn argued that these divisions emerged as industry arrived, a latecomer in a nation already robustly capitalist as a result of its pivotal role in world trade and finance. They survived as, in large part, industry withered away in the decades after 1980, while the City of London, finance, property and services have continued to prosper. The arrival of industrial society had led to the development of what, in 1910, the sociologist and radical Liberal J. A. Hobson called 'Producers England' (sic), rooted in southern Scotland, south Wales, northern England and parts of the Midlands. The dominant social groups in these regions tended to be provincial industrialists and the organised working class. Politics was usually dominated by the Liberal and (after 1918) the Labour Parties and religious observation by Nonconformity and Roman Catholicism. The ruling class, however, remained located in 'Consumers England', where the 'Southern-based hierarchy'⁶ reproduced itself through the Conservative Party, the Anglican Church, the public schools and the ancient universities. Its power and influence continued to thrive in the late twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first even as the old industrial regions struggled with the disaster of deindustrialisation. Far from this reflecting what Martin Wiener called 'an anti-industrial culture', it was actually *encouraged* by a State policy rooted in a 'Crown-Constitution' guaranteeing

the complex reproduction of an earlier mode of crass materialism lodged in unshakeable command of both State and British civil society before either the steam-engine or democracy were invented.⁷

⁶ Tom Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass: Britain and its Monarchy* (London: Verso, 2011), p. 243. Nairn was an admirer of the work of Hobson. See for example *The Break-Up of Britain* (see note 2) pp. 13-14 and 16, and pp. 375-77.

⁷ Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass* (see note 6) p. 240.

Three Prime Ministers since 2010 – David Cameron, Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak – have been educated, respectively, at Eton, Eton and Winchester. All are graduates of Oxford University. None has any connection with industry. Cameron and Sunak have backgrounds in the City and Johnson's is in journalism. At the time of writing, 44 per cent of all MPs and 65 per cent of Cabinet Ministers have received a private education.⁸

The resilience of the old order over three centuries and, after 1945, in the face not just of decolonisation but of the economic and social debacle of deindustrialisation, is remarkable. It is thanks in large part to the social cement provided by the Ukanian Monarchy, at once the apex of the system and the unifying factor which demands the loyalty of all from the aristocracy to the working class. In return the Crown shows itself to be good at charitable works and national showpiece occasions (Coronations, Funerals, Trooping the Colour), willing to risk sacrifice in war, accommodate 'reasonable' demands for political change at home, and, above all, to be '*just like us*', enjoying barbecues, sport, the countryside, a quiet drink and a friendly chat with the locals. These are the core components of what Nairn identifies as a British (or, in his words, Anglo-British) nationalism, forged in the late seventeenth century and an early modern world which was capitalist but neither industrial nor democratic. Its heroes are not the radicals and revolutionaries of popular nationalist movements (such as Simon Bolivar, Lajos Kossuth and Giuseppe Garibaldi) but generals, plunderers and admirals such as Wolf, Clive and Nelson. And it is this Anglo-British nationalism which generates the popular consent needed to sustain global power. On the world stage it celebrates Britain's national 'greatness', supremacy over other nations and enduring influence and military prestige. The domestic counterpart of this expansionist outlook is tradition, stability and continuity, based on the rejection of 'foreign' religious and intellectual ideas and political systems. Plucky British 'muddling through', empiricism, individual freedom and the sovereignty of Crown-in-Parliament were counterposed to the absolutism and Roman Catholicism of Louis XIV and, later, to the Enlightenment liberalism of revolutionary France. All in all, this is an ideology rooted not in the welfare of all citizens and the democratic accountability of governments to the people but in a 'British way', whose essentials,

⁸ Luca Quadrini, 'MPs have rejected an inquiry into removing private schools' charitable status. Which side are they on?', *Morning Star*, 24 January 2023 at <<https://tinyurl.com/2p8zutpy>> or <<https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/f/mps-have-rejected-an-inquiry-into-removing-private-schools-charitable-status>>.

unchanged since 1688, are still celebrated at the Last Night of the Proms with its regular mass rendition of songs like 'Rule Britannia' and 'Land of Hope and Glory'.

Nationalism

Nairn argues that Marx's second blind spot was failure to appreciate the power and significance of nationalism. His and Engels' call for workers of the world to unite in *The Communist Manifesto* was based on the conviction that, even by the late 1840s, the international expansion of capitalism including the working class without which it could not exist, was creating a global market and a proletariat *sans frontières*. National obstacles to the free flow of goods, money and people would become obsolete, leaving the bourgeois and the worker, who in the final analysis belonged to a class and not a nation, face to face to struggle for control of the means of production, distribution and exchange across the world. Nairn argued, however, that it was the nation state which had been responsible for the spread of capitalism during the nineteenth century. The process had been driven by British capital and military power, used to project industrial and financial wealth across the globe, along with the reaction generated within states determined to protect themselves from domination by more developed countries (notably, of course, the United Kingdom). This reaction often took the form of nationalist uprisings inspired by the ideas of popular sovereignty associated with the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Nationalism drove economic and political expansion on the part of countries whose own industrial revolutions came after Britain's. It became the midwife of both technological and political modernization, of an expanding industrial capitalism and, after 1870, of international rivalry.

Given that the new industrial powers were self-consciously modern states created by popular revolutions and responsible to mass national electorates (even if they were monarchies like Germany), it was not realistic to imagine as Marx and Engels had in the late 1840s that some kind of stateless international socialist movement was going to overthrow capitalism in the foreseeable future. Nationalism (argued Nairn) has remained a problem within Marxism ever since. If the readiness of workers throughout Europe to fight for their own home countries in 1914 was not conclusive enough evidence of this, then the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 surely ended lingering hopes that 'class was society's key

galvanising dynamic'.⁹ Nairn argued instead that this historic role was being played by nationalism, a political formulation he called 'the modern Janus'¹⁰ (after the Roman god of doorways, gates, time and beginnings and endings, who had two faces, the one looking in the opposite direction to the other). World history since 1914 has provided abundant evidence of nationalism's potential for vast evil; but Nairn appreciated, also, its capacity to modernise and liberate. It was, after all, nationalism which had in post-1945 western Europe facilitated the transformation of a set of failed and broken states into liberal and social democratic nations keen to promote mutual co-operation.¹¹ This was achieved through the painstaking creation over decades of the transnational structures which developed into today's European Union.¹² For all its faults this remains a vehicle for peaceful economic, environmental, cultural, medical and scientific collaboration.

Nairn argued that Scottish, Welsh and Irish nationalism, represented by the Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru and Sinn Fein, were the British versions of the nationalist movements which had modernised and democratised western Europe after 1945. He saw, in a United Kingdom broken up into its constituent parts, the possibility of a fresh start in these islands, away from the hegemony of the old order and an inherently reactionary and imperialist State. Unsurprisingly, the SNP, Plaid and Sinn Fein were Janus-like organisations with faces turned to past and future. They all looked back towards native linguistic, cultural and literary traditions which had been marginalised (especially in Wales and Northern Ireland) over most of the last two centuries; but given that they were legatees of Hobson's 'Producer's England', they also looked forward to the creation of progressive Scottish, Welsh and Irish states and societies based on popular sovereignty, written constitutions and civil rights. In England, however, the hegemony of a nationalism based on exceptionalism, greatness and the projection of global power remained strong. Indeed it had become more intense over the years since 1970, fuelled by resentment against the loss of Empire and mass immigration

⁹ Jamie Maxwell, 'The Big Interview: Tom Nairn'. *The Herald*, 23 October 2016 at <<https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/14818711.big-interview-tom-nairn/>>.

¹⁰ See Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain*, (see note 2) ch. 9.

¹¹ See for example Alan S. Milward, *The Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1945-51* (London: Methuen, 1984).

¹² See Tom Nairn, 'Europe Can Still Refurbish Our Sense of Nationhood', *The Guardian*, 23 August, 1994.

and against organisations such as the EU which were seen as threats to national sovereignty. Given that England, with its population of 56 million, made up 80 per cent of Great Britain's population, the question was whether the prospect of the country's break-up would trigger an angry Anglo-British reaction capable of frustrating the fresh start; or whether the English people would facilitate it by mobilising their own longstanding radical tradition and creating a mass movement with similar values to those of the other nationalist parties.¹³

These were the key arguments which underpinned Nairn's analysis of modern British history. His approach explains why separatist movements have grown into major political forces within the UK over the last half century, with national administrations committed to varying degrees of home rule now established in Belfast, Cardiff and Edinburgh, even though the nations they govern are still within the Union. Moreover, the perception that capitalism, imperialism and political reaction were built into the post-1688 British constitution is a particularly enlightening insight. It explains Britain's reactionary turn after 1979, one that the cultural theorist Stuart Hall presciently identified in that year as 'The Great Moving Right Show'.¹⁴

Thatcher's counter-revolution

Both *The Break-Up of Britain* and Hall's essay were written as British society and politics fell under the deepening shadows of racism and authoritarianism during the 1970s. There were rumours that a military coup was being prepared against the Labour Governments returned to power in the two general elections of 1974. Not many at the time took this possibility seriously but the evidence suggests there was considerable support for a Latin American-style '*Pronunciamento*', designed to achieve a rapid seizure of power in the name of the 'National Will', in senior ranks of the armed forces and sections of the security and intelligence services, on the Right of the Conservative Party, in business and financial circles and among sections of the media. The object seems to have been the establishment of an emergency National Government dedicated to the reversal of both Britain's post-1945 progress towards social democracy and its retreat from Empire to a new position as second rank power within the European Economic Community (confirmed by a popular 2:1 majority in the 1975 referendum). This was seen as a very benign process by

¹³ See Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain*, (see note 2) chs 6 and 7, *After Britain*, ch. 5; and *The Enchanted Glass*, throughout.

¹⁴ Stuart Hall, 'The Great Moving Right Show', *Marxism Today*, January 1979, pp. 14-20.

many British people.¹⁵ To the plotters, however, it was a period of unchecked 'national decline', in what was perceived as its slide towards becoming a trade union-dominated socialist state steadily losing all world power and influence. They wanted to roll back the years through steps to root out socialism from British politics and society, curb union militancy, place the military in control of public services, restrict immigration, reduce public spending (except on defence and law and order) and crack down on 'scroungers'. Those regarded as dissenters and subversives would face detention without trial (which thanks to 'The Troubles' had existed in Northern Ireland since 1971).¹⁶

There was, of course, no *military* coup. In 1979, however, with the coming to power of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative administration, Britain had a government whose Prime Minister and senior colleagues echoed many of the anxieties which had motivated those who had supported one. In 1978 she appeared to align herself with far Right groups when she spoke sympathetically about popular fears that the country might be 'swamped' by immigration from 'the new Commonwealth or Pakistan'.¹⁷ Her ideological mentor, Sir Keith Joseph, commented in 1976 that 'the pursuit of income inequality will turn this country into a totalitarian slum'. During the 1979 election Thatcher told BBC reporter Michael Cockerell, 'I can't bear Britain in decline, I just can't'.¹⁸ Like the coup plotters, the Thatcher governments were determined to reverse a 'decline' they equated with 'socialism' and withdrawal from imperial commitments. Their intention was to dismantle the post-1945 social democratic paradigm, replacing it with a new one based on the free market and the empowerment of entrepreneurs at home and the projection of British power overseas.

¹⁵ Ian Herbert, '1976: When national happiness peaked', *The Independent*, 17 March 2004 at <<https://tinyurl.com/4k2sb3wd>> or <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/1976-when-national-happiness-peaked-64679.html>>.

¹⁶ The most comprehensive source for information about this remains Stephen Dorril and Robin Ramsay, *Smear! Wilson and the Secret State* (London: 4th Estate, 1991). See also Brian Crozier, *Free Agent. The Unseen War 1941-1991* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), pp. 121-122; Gerald James, *In the Public Interest* (London: Little Brown, 1995); Newton, *The Reinvention of Britain 1960-2016* (see note 2), esp. pp. 116-121; Bernard Porter, *Plots and Paranoia. A History of Political Espionage in Britain, 1790-1988* (London: Routledge, 1989), ch. 10; and Paul Routledge, *Public Servant, Secret Agent: the Elusive Life and Violent Death of Airey Neave* (London: 4th Estate, 2003).

¹⁷ Margaret Thatcher foundation, transcript of a *World in Action* interview with Margaret Thatcher, 30 January 1978, at <<https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103485>>.

¹⁸ Newton, *The Reinvention of Britain* (see note 2), p. 120.

To this end the Thatcher governments embarked on programmes of tax cuts and the privatisation of industry and on laws restricting the activities of trade unions and the right to strike. They pursued a macroeconomic strategy centring on what Woolfson, Foster and Beck described as 'one massive "market-clearing" operation in which the income from North Sea oil provided a safety net' while shock therapy was applied to the economy.¹⁹ Public borrowing was cut while interest rates were increased, reaching 17 per cent by the end of 1979, and the pound allowed to appreciate against other currencies to £1 = \$2.42 by February 1981 (a level not seen for over a decade). At the same time exchange controls were scrapped, permitting a large-scale capital outflow which by 1985 had facilitated Britain's brief return to being the world's leading creditor nation, a position it had not held since 1914.²⁰ In response the economy slumped, manufacturing output falling by 15 per cent between 1979 and 1982, while unemployment soared from 1.3 million in 1979 to 3.2 million by late 1982, heights not reached since the 1930s. There was rapid deindustrialisation, seen in the falling share of GDP taken by manufacturing (dropping from 25 per cent in 1979 to 21 per cent in 1984) and in the 1982 appearance of a British manufacturing trade deficit for the first time since the industrial revolution.²¹ The process has continued ever since, with manufacturing now contributing less than 10 per cent of GDP.²²

The shock therapy administered to the British economy by Thatcher's programme did indeed undermine the material foundations of post-war social democracy. The commitments to full employment, generously funded health, social and educational services, the reduction of inequalities and to the use of growth's proceeds for social purposes were abandoned. Trade union membership fell as unemployment rose, sliding from 12.1 million in 1979 to 8.4 million by 1990.²³ The percentage of the population living in poverty (defined as being in receipt of less than 60

¹⁹ Charles Woolfson, John Foster and Matthew Beck, *Paying the Piper: Capital and Labour in Britain's Offshore Oil Industry* (London: Mansell, 1997), pp. 31-33. See also Newton, *The Reinvention of Britain* (see note 2), pp. 171-171.

²⁰ Newton and Porter, *Modernization Frustrated* (see note 2) p. 201.

²¹ Newton and Porter, *Modernization Frustrated* (see note 2) p. 197.

²² See *Manufacturing: Statistics and Policy*, p. 4 (House of Commons Library Briefing Paper 01942, 10 January 2020) at <<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn01942/>>.

²³ Newton, *The Reinvention of Britain* (see note 2) p. 145.

per cent of median household income) rose from 13.4 per cent to 22.2 per cent by 1992.²⁴ The old industrial centres of 'Producer's England' were afflicted by joblessness and social deprivation. 'Consumer's England' flourished by comparison, with the fifteen most prosperous towns in the country to be found in the Home Counties, with a spur out to East Anglia.²⁵ Backed by a coalition of Conservative members and voters composed largely of non-unionized labour, the self-employed, aspiring as well as existing property owners and defence contractors and the armed services, Thatcher's governments built a new British economy. Here, the fastest growth could be seen in the City of London, property transactions and in the financial and services sectors. This became the material foundation for Thatcher's paradigm, one characterised by the political economy and values of the free market, namely a preference for the private over the public, deregulation of business, the encouragement of individual choice, the accumulation of personal wealth and the acceptance of widening social inequality. Alongside this there developed an increasingly truculent nationalism, encouraged by much of the popular press and driven by nostalgia for a return to 'greatness', when Britannia not only ruled the waves but was white into the bargain.

Thatcher's paradigm may have been new in the sense that it replaced the old post-1945 consensus but in fact it represented a popular (and populist) revival of the Anglo-British nationalism identified by Nairn. At its heart were the old convictions that Britain could only be Britain if it played a world role and that, the USA and nations of the old Commonwealth apart, foreigners and foreign powers could never be entirely trusted. Its function was the generation of consent for a contemporary version of the Whig oligarchy, its wealth still rooted in finance and property, whose interests the post-1688 State had been created to promote. Although this had never gone away, its salience and influence had appeared to be on the wane during the decades after 1945, especially in the 1960s and 1970s. Without the deconstruction of industrial and social democratic Britain it may never have made a comeback, facing instead a slow journey to irrelevance and oblivion. The 1980s saw its return to power, along with a set of rules governing what kind of domestic and external political and economic policies and initiatives were to be allowed and what kind were unacceptable.

A very soft British coup

²⁴ Newton, *The Reinvention of Britain* (see note 2) p. 174.

²⁵ Newton, *The Reinvention of Britain* (see note 2) p. 173.

In effect, there was a very British coup but it was a very soft one. Formal democracy remained and elections came and went after 1979 but the range of political choices available to the electorate has steadily shrunk during the subsequent decades. A new set of parameters was established, rules of the game intended to guarantee that successive governing parties, whether Conservative or Labour (or Liberal, as in the 2010-16 Coalition), would preserve the post-1688 British State and its peculiar version of national identity through an undeviating pursuit of certain key strategic priorities.²⁶

The first of these priorities was that the UK was to remain a 'Great Power'. This status is defined by possession of a nuclear deterrent and maintenance of the 'special relationship' with the USA (without whose assistance there would be no British deterrent at all) and by both the willingness and the ability to project power beyond the European theatre. That is why an upgrade for the Trident nuclear missile was agreed and why two new aircraft carriers have been built, all at vast expense, in the last decade. It is why Britain went to war against Argentina to win back the Falkland Islands in 1982. The operation was very costly in lives lost and ruined, and in money spent. But the alternative of accepting the Argentinian action as a *fait accompli* and resettling the inhabitants wherever they wished to go would have been an admission of failure by the Thatcher government. Neither the Prime Minister nor her political project would have been likely to have survived. In addition, all remaining pretensions that Britain was 'Great', with the ability to project power across the globe, would have been punctured beyond repair.²⁷ This would have been a strategic disaster outranking even Suez for the British State, leading Thatcher to contemplate the use of nuclear weapons against Argentina if the Task Force sent to retake the Islands ran into insuperable difficulties.²⁸ Determination that Britain had not only to remain 'Great' but have the capacity to show this to the world also explains the catastrophic intervention in Iraq, done in the teeth of massive public opposition, and the willingness to join Washington in a new Cold War aimed largely against what is seen as the Chinese challenge to the US-dominated world

²⁶ See Anthony Barnett, *Iron Britannia. Time to Take the Great out of Britain*, 2nd edition (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), p. xxi.

²⁷ See in particular Barnett, *Iron Britannia* (see note 26) Introduction and chs 3-4.

²⁸ See Paul Rogers, 'Notes on the British Deployment of Nuclear Weapons in Crises', in *Lobster* 28 (1994), and Jon Henley, 'Thatcher intended to "nuke Argentina"', *The Guardian*, 22 November 2005, at <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/nov/22/books.france>>.

order which had been established after the dissolution of the USSR in 1991.²⁹

Secondly, Britain sought to maintain and expand its network of external financial and commercial interests, rooted mainly in the City of London. These included its shadow empire of tax havens based in existing and former Crown Colonies.³⁰ Government policy has generally aimed to ensure that activities in this sector stay free from regulation on the part of any public authority whether based in the UK or overseas (at least, as far as international law will allow). This is why the Thatcher government removed exchange controls so soon after its election in 1979, why in 1986 it drove through the 'Big Bang' in a successful attempt to deregulate the City, and why during the noughties New Labour encouraged HM Revenue and Customs to develop a 'business friendly' regime in its relations with UK banks and multinationals. Unsurprisingly, this regime facilitated spectacular cases of tax evasion (25 per cent of all British multinationals paying no corporation tax at all in 2005-6)³¹ and criminal activity (a notable example being the involvement of HSBC in a vast money laundering operation for 'drug kingpins and rogue nations', leading it to be fined \$2 billion by US authorities in 2012).³² It also explains Brexit, or at least the extreme version of this promoted after 2019 by Boris Johnson's Conservative government, one dominated by MPs and Ministers with backgrounds in the finance and service sectors.³³

Thirdly, both radical popular protest and 'socialism' had to be driven to the margin of British politics. Their capacity to change government policy and in so doing root political authority in popular sovereignty, had

²⁹ Scott Newton, 'The US, China and a new Cold War?', *Lobster* 80 (Winter 2020) at <<https://tinyurl.com/53acc7h5>> or <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/80/the-usa-china-and-a-new-cold-war/>>.

³⁰ See Nicholas Shaxson, *Treasure Islands: Tax Havens and the Men Who Stole the World* (London: Vintage, 2012).

³¹ See Newton, *The Reinvention of Britain* (see note 2) p. 219.

³² 'HSBC Money laundering report: key findings', *BBC News*, 11 December 2012, at <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-18880269>>.

³³ See for example, Simon Matthews, 'And in 5th Place? The long march to Freeport UK', *Lobster* 80 (Winter 2020) at <<https://tinyurl.com/mwftxaxr>> or <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/80/and-in-5th-place-the-long-march-to-freeport-uk/>>; Scott Newton, review of *AngloAmerica: why Gulf Wealth Matters to Britain*, by David Wearing, *Lobster* 78 (Winter 2019) at <<https://tinyurl.com/yc6zc8fz>> or <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/78/angloarabia-why-gulf-wealth-matters-to-britain-by-david-wearing/>>; and Scott Newton, 'The Lexit Delusion', *Lobster* 79 (Summer 2020) at <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/79/the-lexit-delusion/>>.

been evident in extra-Parliamentary mass mobilisations both during the 1970s, notably in the form of organised working class protest against anti-trade union legislation and factory closures, and in the successful anti-poll tax movement at the end of the 1980s. By contrast, Thatcher and her supporters located sovereignty in its traditional home, namely the Crown-in-Parliament, seeing this as the only true constitutional safeguard for individual freedom.

From 1979 onwards the official attitude to organised working class protest and large-scale public demonstrations has been that they undermine Parliamentary sovereignty and threaten law and order and the security of private property. This is the thinking behind two pieces of legislation currently being debated in Parliament. The government's Public Order Bill is designed to curtail, if not render impossible, public manifestations of dissent such as Extinction Rebellion, Insulate Britain, Just Stop Oil, and Enough is Enough. Both the Conservative government and the leadership of the Labour opposition appear to consider the use of direct action by these movements to be subversive and explicitly intended to shift the status quo regarding both the environment and political economy, just as the massive demonstration against war with Iraq in 2003 aimed to alter foreign policy. Meanwhile the Conservatives' Minimum Service Bill aims to undermine the right to strike by giving employers and the Business Secretary the power to dismiss workers 'who refuse to cross picket lines to provide an as yet undefined level of services during public sector walkouts'. These proposals go well beyond minimum service provisions in many EU states. They have been condemned by European Trade Union Confederation General Secretary Esther Lynch as 'draconian' and by a coalition of French, German, Spanish and Italian unions for dragging 'the UK . . . away from democratic norms'.³⁴

In economic policy, not just all forms of 'socialism' but Keynesian social democracy into the bargain were identified with Stalinism, ruinously high corporate and personal taxation and the confiscation of property. This viewpoint was plainly nonsense but it was encouraged by the 'network of right-wing factions within private industry, the City and the military-intelligence establishment'³⁵ which had coalesced around Thatcher in the 1970s. It was behind the demonization of extra-Parliamentary opposition to Thatcher's government such as the National

³⁴ Matt Trinder, 'Europe's Unions Slam Tory plan to Stop Strikes', *Morning Star*, 20 February 2023 at <<https://tinyurl.com/wpkmtdb6>> or <<https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/b/europes-unions-slam-tory-plan-to-stop-strikes>>.

³⁵ Newton, *The Reinvention of Britain* (see note 2) p. 157.

Union of Mineworkers (NUM), fighting against the government's pit closure programme, as 'the enemy within'. No deal with the NUM was acceptable to the Prime Minister since this would have weakened, possibly fatally, the government's efforts to curb the powers of the unions. The NUM had to be destroyed as a political and industrial force, even if doing so on occasion involved the use of tactics more commonly associated with the governments of police states than democracies.³⁶

The attempt to drive 'socialism' off the British political agenda was successful. It disappeared as a serious political force after the defeats of the miners in 1984-5 and of the Labour Party in the elections of 1983, 1987 and 1992. Labour won again in 1997 and stayed in power until 2010, but it governed as 'New Labour' and did not seek to revise or replace in any way the paradigm established by Thatcher after 1979. Some tentative steps back towards Keynesianism in the wake of the financial crisis of 2007-8 were quickly reversed by the Conservative-Liberal Democratic Coalition of 2010-16, which introduced 'austerity' in a bid to ensure that the costs of the massive State bailouts undertaken to prevent the collapse of the financial system were paid not by the City and the bankers but by the people, through a seemingly endless attrition of the public services.

Between 2015 and 2020 the Labour Party under veteran radical Jeremy Corbyn – elected to the Party leadership by 59 per cent of the membership – mounted a serious challenge to the anti-socialist order. Embracing a left of centre social democratic agenda designed to reverse austerity and put the promotion of international co-operation (including the recognition of Palestine 'as a state as one step towards a genuine two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict'³⁷) ahead of the requirements of the special relationship, it received widespread public support in the 2017 general election. Its share of the popular vote, languishing at 29 per cent and 30 per cent in 2010 and 2015 respectively, rose to 40 per cent, only two points behind the Tories. The backing received by this bid to start dismantling the Thatcherite paradigm created immense alarm within the post-1979 establishment. Corbyn became the target of vicious personal and political attacks, including mendacious

³⁶ See Seamus Milne, *The Enemy Within* (London: Verso, 2004); Newton, *The Reinvention of Britain* (see note 2) pp. 157-8.

³⁷ Chris Baynes, 'UK would "recognise Palestine as state" under Labour government, Jeremy Corbyn says', *The Independent*, 24 June 2018 at <<https://tinyurl.com/4stcnc76>> or <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/palestine-state-recognition-jeremy-corbyn-labour-government-israel-soon-a8413796.html>>

accusations of anti-Semitism (fuelled by his support for Palestinian rights), both in the media and the main political parties.³⁸ These were especially strong within the Parliamentary Labour Party, where many members continued to favour New Labour policies. The relentless assault, combined with the resulting division and acrimony within the Labour Party, cost it the 2019 election and its share of the popular vote slid to 32 per cent. Corbyn was driven out of the Parliamentary Labour Party and by 2023, with Labour under Sir Keir Starmer heading back towards the political economy of the New Labour project, it appeared that there was no prospect of a renewed national shift towards social democracy. Labour's alternative was reduced to an offer of continuing austerity softened by modest investment in green initiatives combined with unquestioning acceptance of the Atlantic Alliance and Britain's status as a global power with a nuclear deterrent.

Fourthly, the integrity of the United Kingdom has to be maintained. This requires the defeat or, at the very least, the containment of separatist tendencies. The increasing popularity of nationalist political movements within Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales after 1970 led to the establishment of the governments in Belfast, Cardiff and Edinburgh after 1997. The key to the UK Parliament's consent to this process is the term by which it has been usually described – 'devolution'. In other words, the Northern Irish, Welsh and Scottish Parliaments do not exercise authority on behalf of their citizens but *with the permission of the Crown-in-Parliament, which has delegated to them powers over a limited range of subjects relating to domestic affairs*.³⁹ These include health, education, economic and environmental policy. Each assembly has limited but not identical tax raising powers. There remain, however, many issues reserved to Westminster, notably constitutional affairs, foreign policy, fiscal and monetary policy, trade, social security, policing, justice, major energy projects and some transport matters. There is, of course, no written constitution governing relations between Westminster and the devolved governments but there is the Sewel 'Convention' (placed on a statutory basis in 2016) that Westminster would not 'normally' (a very flexible word, as we shall see) legislate on devolved matters without the

³⁸ See the Al Jazeera reports, 'The Labour Files', especially at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5DTMF0MSXng>>. This is also the subject of Alex Nunn's forthcoming *Sabotage: The Inside Hit Job That Brought Down Jeremy Corbyn* (London: OR books, 2023).

³⁹ See Tom Nairn, *After Britain: New Labour and the Return of Scotland* (London: Verso, 2000) ch. 4.

consent of the relevant devolved institution.⁴⁰ The Sewel Convention notwithstanding, the relationship of the devolved governments with Westminster reflects not London's acceptance of the democratic arguments for home rule but a strategy of accommodation fundamentally the same as the one used to draw the teeth of nationalist movements within the British Empire (especially India, where it was employed from the late nineteenth century).

The purpose of devolution has been to reinforce the integrity of the United Kingdom. The 2014 referendum on Scottish independence gave the British establishment a fright because it suggested that it could not be taken for granted that Scotland would remain part of the Union. Although the final result confirmed support for continuing Scottish membership of the UK, it had been a close call. A small number of opinion polls before voting day had suggested a victory for the nationalist cause. Its eventual defeat did not appear to shake the political authority of the SNP in Edinburgh, where it has been the governing party since 2007. Public backing for independence has remained strong, leaving the establishment worried about the future. Britain's transformation into a set of separate states, or even into a confederation, would spell the end of the old Anglo-British Union. No longer would there be a *British* world role or place on the UN Security Council. The deterrent would become an *English* deterrent. But for how long would this continue to exist given that the dissolution of the British State might cause the Royal Navy to lose its Faslane Base on the Clyde and the US to review its commitment to the Atlantic Alliance, possibly replacing it by the reinforcement of existing strategic ties with continental NATO members? London's external financial commitments would of course continue – but what would happen to the shadow empire of tax havens based in British overseas territories?

The possibility that the political logic of devolution might lead to the development of existential threats to Ukania is why relations between London and the devolved governments deteriorated sharply after the Brexit referendum of 2016 (when Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU), in particular after Theresa May's departure from office in 2019. This became very clear when May's forlorn efforts to reboot One Nation Toryism were replaced by the Johnson government's 'Global Britain'. Global Britain involved an attempt to return Britain to a level of

⁴⁰ *Interim Report by the Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales* (Cardiff: Welsh Government, 2022), p. 35 at <<https://tinyurl.com/5t3jnx3s>> or <<https://www.gov.wales/independent-commission-on-the-constitutional-future-of-wales-interim-report>>.

international political, military and financial influence it had not exercised since before the Suez fiasco in 1956. Seeking to assure itself of popular support through the evocation of a particularly xenophobic and jingoistic version of Anglo-British nationalism, it was a project which was bound to lead to differences between London and the devolved governments, especially those in Edinburgh and Cardiff which did not sympathise with the 'hard' Brexit favoured by Johnson.

It is therefore no surprise that differences have been especially marked in negotiations between the four governments over the United Kingdom Internal Market Act of 2020, passed at Westminster but not approved by either the Scottish or Welsh governments. The Act requires that 'powers previously exercised by the EU should be retained by Westminster', and that the requirements of establishing a single UK market 'should override the devolved institutions' legislative powers'. To this end, London has overridden the Sewel Convention, arguing that it was inapplicable in this case given that *Brexit was not a 'normal' event*.⁴¹ The same pattern has been followed regarding the replacement of EU structural funds, with Westminster's Levelling Up and Shared Prosperity initiatives not only allocating significantly less financial assistance to Wales than it would have received from Brussels but handing this to local authorities rather than the Welsh Government.⁴² Two other examples of London's bid to roll back devolution and assert central control are its legal challenge to the Scottish Government's Gender Reform Bill and its announced intention of repealing the Trade Union Wales Act passed by the Senedd in 2017.⁴³

The soft British coup has transformed the UK into one of the most right-wing and authoritarian of all the contemporary European democracies. It is true that current polls show the Conservative Government, facing a general election next year, to be profoundly unpopular. Although the Labour Party which is likely to replace it certainly looks unlikely to make radical changes in the Thatcher paradigm governing Britain's political economy, there are indications of a shift in external strategy back towards co-operation with the EU. All the same, however, Ukania and everything that goes with it is likely to endure given

⁴¹ *Interim Report by the Independent Commission* (see note 40) p. 65.

⁴² See 'UK Government plan to replace EU funds fails Wales financially and is a deliberate and unacceptable assault on Welsh devolution', Welsh Government Press release, at <<https://tinyurl.com/2p93bhsc>> or <<https://www.gov.wales/uk-government-plans-replace-eu-funds-fails-wales-financially-and-deliberate-and-unacceptable>>.

⁴³ See note 42.

the absence of a challenge to it on the part of a major national party. This points in the direction of continuing economic and social decline, obsession with the Monarchy, possession of nuclear weapons, the likelihood of further misguided and counterproductive foreign policy initiatives driven by the conviction that Great Britain is by definition a global power, the ongoing marginalization and repression of socialist and social democratic alternatives to the free market and austerity, and to repeated efforts on the part of Westminster to frustrate the devolution settlement.

Beyond Ukania?

One of the many benefits of Tom Nairn's work is that he has explained why since 1979 the British State has locked onto a national strategy which has delivered continuing social breakdown, industrial decline, reaction, repression and imperialism. This unfortunate process is, of course, on one level the product of circumstances prevailing in post-war Britain. Yet it is also to be located in events which occurred over three centuries ago, in the creation and the nature of the State itself. This State is now clearly dysfunctional and quite unsuited for the contemporary world. History indicates there is some plausibility in Nairn's argument that a democratic and progressive society in the British Isles can only emerge with the fundamental transformation of the British State, if not with its abolition and replacement by one (or several) founded on popular sovereignty and written constitutions.

Such a task places a good deal of weight on the ability of the different nationalist movements within the UK, which include not only political parties like the SNP, Sinn Fein, the Alliance Party, the SDLP and Plaid Cymru but the English radical tradition⁴⁴ (evident, perhaps, in the Corbyn insurgency within Labour and the current wave of industrial militancy) to extend their influence over non-aligned progressives as well as over those within the UK's national political parties. As Neal Ascherson has commented, Nairn's work suggests that politics is not enough to achieve this, that freeing Scotland (and the other nations of the UK) from

⁴⁴ See Michael Calderbank and Hilary Wainwright, 'Radical Roots – Corbyn and the Tradition of English Radicalism', *Red Pepper*, 14 October 2019; Anthony Taylor and John Enderby, 'From "flame" to embers? Whatever happened to the English radical tradition c.1880-2020?', *Cultural and Social History*, vol. 18 (2021), pp. 243-264; Tony Benn, *Arguments for Socialism* (London: Penguin, 1980), pp. 21-44; and the pioneering work of Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (London, Penguin, 1976); and E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1968) and *Customs in Common* (London: Penguin, 1993).

'self-colonisation' means the construction of a widely accepted (or hegemonic) democratic ideology throughout these islands to replace Anglo-Britishness. This involves 'conquering the commanding heights of civil society and culture . . . as much as mass demonstrations or election victories.'⁴⁵ Only this process is likely to generate the mass support and the programmes capable of propelling the transformation of Ukania into a new political entity (or entities) made up of modern European democratic and social republics based on popular sovereignty and the welfare of their inhabitants. Given the course of British history since 1979 this does not seem an unreasonable aspiration, even though it might currently appear a rather hopeful one.

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⁴⁵ Ascherson, 'On Tom Nairn' (see note 1)