**THE MAIN POLITICAL ISSUES 1914–1995**

The period opens with the First World War (Chapter 2), in which Britain played a crucial military role: she increased her land-based commitment on the Western Front to equal that of France and did more than any other power to bring about the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in a war on the periphery. The surprising development of the war was that there were few major naval engagements, but British seapower ultimately proved crucial in the blockade against Germany in 1918. Overall, Britain played a more pivotal and varied military role in the First World War than in the Second. The impact of the war on Britain was considerable, expanding the scope of Government power and authority. There also occurred an upheaval in party politics resulting in the split in the Liberal party between Asquith and Lloyd George and the emergence of a coalition under the latter in 1916. The war provided Lloyd George with a launch into peacetime political ascendancy up to 1922, although ultimately he fell because of the lack of a party-political base. Chapter 2 also deals with the paradoxical impact of the war on each of the political parties, ultimately so different from what seemed most likely at the outset. It looks at the complex impact on the economy and society. In some ways the war acted as a radicalising force, while in others it accelerated, or reversed, pre-war trends. Such a traumatic experience was bound to have a wide range of contradictory results.

Chapter 3 examines the fortunes of the Liberal party. One of the great institutions of the nineteenth century, this had evolved out of the Whigs during the 1860s. The Liberals had alternated in power with the Conservatives, then experienced a bleak twenty-year period after 1885 before winning a landslide in 1906. A major theme of the period 1914–39 was the Liberals’ decline as one of the two major political parties. Explanations for, and the implications of, this decline are considered. Was it already apparent before 1914? Was it the direct consequence of the First World War? And was it continuous—or were there periods of intermittent recovery?

The counterpart to Liberal decline was the rise of the Labour party. This was relatively slow between 1900 and 1914, when it averaged 30 to 42 seats in Parliament. The First World War saw Labour make the necessary electoral breakthrough as a result of the 1918 Representation of the People Act and the decline of the Liberals. Labour was able to form its first government in 1924 because of a unique set of circumstances, dealt with in Chapter 4. As a minority government, dependent on Liberal support, it was inherently vulnerable. Its record in office was one of constraint and cautious achievement, but this was interrupted by a series of crises which brought about an early general election and a Conservative landslide. The real beneficiaries of the upheaval of the First World War were the Conservatives, who dominated the political scene for two decades (Chapter 5). They were in power from 1922 to 1923 and between 1924 and 1929, while they also controlled the National Governments between 1931 and 1940. Above all, they scored huge election victories in 1924, 1931 and 1935. Part of their appeal was their claim to be the party of moderation and consensus, a role which Baldwin played convincingly and with skill. In large measure, however, the success of the Conservatives during this period was also due to the problems facing the Liberals and Labour. Baldwin also appeared to score a major victory in his handling of the 1926 general strike. This had roots which went deep into the crisis of the coal industry as well as the overall economic problems experienced by Britain between the wars. Chapter 6 analyses these long-term causes and the more immediate factors which turned a dispute within the coal industry into a general strike. There were clearly two sides in the conflict and battle-lines were carefully drawn between the Government and the Trades Union Congress (TUC). The population at large tended to polarise into support and opposition, and these poles often related to social class and occupation. It is, however, important to avoid too stereotypical an analysis. The eventual failure and long-term effects of the General Strike are also considered, allowing for variations in interpretation.

The General Strike did not, however, damage Labour too fundamentally because MacDonald was back in power in 1929 (Chapter 7), this time with Labour as the largest single party in the House of Commons, although lacking an overall majority. The first eighteen months of this government were relatively promising and MacDonald’s achievements were more substantial than they had been in 1924. He was, however, affected by an economic disaster which was initially beyond his control. To the inexorable increase in unemployment before 1929 was added the impact of the Wall Street Crash on Britain’s finances. MacDonald’s response to the apparent threats to the stability of the Bank of England was to appoint the May Committee in 1931 and to act upon its recommendations for heavy cuts in public expenditure. This split the Labour party, the majority withholding its support for its leader. MacDonald therefore formed a National Government, consisting primarily of Conservatives, but also with a few Labour and Liberal ministers. Chapter 7 considers three key issues related to these events. Was MacDonald misguided in his acceptance of the May Report? Did he subsequently betray the Labour party in establishing a National Government? And did the 1931 crisis have any serious long-term effect on the Labour party?

Although it was Labour which was unfortunate enough to be caught out by the 1931 crisis, all three political parties were bemused by Britain’s economic problems. In retrospect, this is not really surprising, since the inter-war economy was in a state of upheaval (Chapter 8). One feature was the decline of the traditional, or staple, industries, especially iron and steel, shipbuilding, coal and textiles. Another was the rise of several new industries, including motor vehicles, chemicals and electricity supply and manufacturing industries. The changing regional bases of industrial growth and decline were so extensive that they profoundly affected the patterns of unemployment, which reached a peak during the 1930s. This eventually fell back by 1938, although the extent of government responsibility for this is debatable. Ironically, this was also a period of growing prosperity for a large part of the population, which casts a large question mark over whether the thirties was really the ‘Devil’s decade’.

Meanwhile, British foreign policy had to deal with two major powers which were affected in very different ways by the First World War—Germany and Russia (Chapter 9). The former was the subject of the Treaty of Versailles, in which Britain played a vital—and controversial—role. This was followed by an attempt to shore up the post-war settlement in the form of collective security which, however, contained a significant number of defects. These included a huge gap in the arrangements to contain Germany: unlike France, Britain confined its policy of containment to western Europe and expressed a total unwillingness to become involved in the east. This was largely because of a persistent suspicion of Soviet Russia which cancelled out the more positive relations developed with and around Germany. Collective security was therefore inherently vulnerable. During the 1930s it was replaced by appeasement as Britain’s response to European problems and threats (Chapter 10). To a certain extent, however, it had always been one of the strands of collective security and was therefore in part a logical consequence of it. The practical results were that Britain put pressure on France to cut her security connections with eastern Europe and to accept without serious objection Hitler’s remilitarisation of the Rhineland in 1936, his Anschluss (1938), and the annexation of the Sudetenland to Germany in 1938. Chamberlain’s record at the Munich Conference in September 1938 has attracted more controversy than any other action in foreign policy over the whole century. The theories behind this are therefore considered at length, as are those for the reversal of appeasement in 1939 and the guarantee to Poland which eventually led to Britain’s declaration of war on Germany on 2 September 1939.

For the second time in a quarter of a century, therefore, Britain was involved in total war (Chapter 11). Unlike the First World War, Britain’s military role was largely on the periphery—in North Africa and Italy, at sea, and in the air. Britain was the combatant which kept the war going long enough for the Soviet Union and the United States to become involved and finish Germany off. During the whole process, Winston Churchill provided highly effective leadership, although his precise role has been subject to some reinterpretation. In political terms, Britain established an authoritarian government much more quickly in the Second World War than in the First, although full democracy returned rapidly in 1945. There is no doubt that the war benefited Labour much more than the Conservatives, healing their rift of the 1930s, while it all but finished off the Liberals. Economically, the war continued the process of British decline, while socially there were more consequences than after the First World War. This was canalised in the Beveridge Report of 1942, which provided the theoretical foundations of the modern welfare state and especially the National Health Service. The precise extent to which such changes were due to the war, is, however, debatable. Even before the end of the Second World War a general election was held in Britain which swept Churchill out of office and gave Labour a huge overall majority—its first ever (Chapter 12). At the time this result came as a major shock, but most historians argue that it should not have done—that it was the result of Britain being radicalised by the experience of war and by the increased expectations of social reform, which Labour was considered most likely to deliver. The changes made by the 1945–51 Labour government were fundamental. They included the welfare state, with its integral national health service, and the nationalisation of a number of key industries and enterprises. These have been considered a radical break with the past and the introduction of a new type of state with more centralised governmental controls. But was this true? It could also be argued that the changes which emerged after 1945 had their roots very much in the periods 1905–14, 1914–18 and 1918–39, as well as in the second experience of total war.

After establishing the welfare state, Labour gave way to the Conservatives (Chapter 13), who won three general elections in a row in 1951, 1955 and 1959. The Conservatives retained most of the reforms which had been introduced by the Attlee government, deciding only to renationalise the steel industry. The length of their tenure of office was due partly to the effectiveness of ministers like Butler, Maudling, Macleod, Macmillan and Heath and partly to a series of favourable objective factors. These included a period of economic growth which the Conservatives claimed as their doing, an assertion which is examined. They also benefited from Labour’s internal divisions between the left, who wanted to press on with the destruction of the capitalist system and the abandonment of nuclear weapons, and the right, led by Gaitskell. The decline of the Conservatives was due to the reversal of the earlier factors which had operated in their favour. After 1960 the economy took a downturn and had serious political effects with which Macmillan could not cope. The Conservatives also faced a series of scandals, to which most ailing governments seem to be prone. Meanwhile, Labour had recovered its unity with the reconciliation of the left and right under the pragmatic leadership of Harold Wilson. This enabled him to win a narrow majority in the 1964 general election, which he substantially increased the following year.

The period 1964–79 saw a full return to two-party politics: Labour under Wilson dominated the period 1964–70, the Conservatives under Heath were in power between 1970 and 1974, and Labour returned between 1974 and 1979, initially under Wilson, who was succeeded by Callaghan. It was a period of crisis and reforms (Chapter 14). The latter saw an attempt to deal with a wide range of issues which had been shelved by the Conservatives between 1951 and 1964. Reforms affected the civil service and other areas of the administration, local government, moves towards devolution for Scotland and Wales, changes in the House of Commons committee system, attempts to modernise the House of Lords, enlargement of the electorate by reducing the voting age to 18, and a wide range of bills covering social issues including the death penalty, sexual offences, divorce, race relations, sex discrimination, industrial relations. Crisis affected mainly the economy, with balance of payments deficits, inflation and industrial disruption on a scale unknown since the 1920s. This accelerated during the 1970s. Heath attempted to move towards government de-control, but failed. The crisis in industrial relations had a profound political impact, helping more than anything else to bring down Heath in February 1974 and Callaghan 1979.

The election of 1979 was to prove one of the most significant of the twentieth century. It brought to power a prime minister who was determined to reverse the previous consensus that had existed between Labour and the Conservatives about the broad stream of economic and social policy (Chapter 15). She was committed to reducing the role of government, although ironically this meant the actual extension of its powers. She based her economic policies upon the principles of monetarism, she introduced the notion of privatisation and restructured central and local government. She was able to do all this as a result of three successive election victories in 1979, 1983 and 1987. In these she was assisted partly by external factors, such as the Falklands War of 1982 which diverted public opinion from the unpopularity of her earlier policies, and partly because of the divisions within Labour. Overall, some observers have advanced the claim that there was a ‘Thatcher revolution’, although it could be asked whether her policies were primarily ideological or opportunist.

Meanwhile, the Conservatives were given an extended lease on power by the second crisis to have affected the Labour party (Chapter 16). Following their defeat in the 1979 general election, Labour experienced a substantial swing to the left, which gave the leadership to Michael Foot and caused the withdrawal of the right to form the new Social Democratic Party (SDP). Labour’s policies also moved leftwards, including a commitment to unilateral nuclear disarmament. The party was, however, severely embarrassed by the activities of its far-left Trotskyist fringe and by the massive erosion of support from the sectors of the population who traditionally supported it. The loss of four consecutive general elections forced a review of both the organisation and policy of the Labour party. This was undertaken by Kinnock, Smith and Blair, who moved the party steadily back towards the centre ground and adopted a more pragmatic approach in the tradition of Gaitskell and Wilson. Although Labour lost the 1992 general election, their recovery was well under way and by 1995 they seemed well placed to win the next election.

Returning to 1945, another strand in Britain’s post-war history was her foreign policy (Chapter 17). Britain emerged from the Second World War convinced that she could continue her role as one of the superpowers. This was largely because of her role, along with the United States and the Soviet Union, in defeating Nazi Germany. During the 1940s Britain took the leading role in the Cold War, often having to prod the United States into securing Europe against perceived Soviet aggression. This goes against the more traditional view that Britain was a moderating force in the Cold War. By the beginning of the 1950s it became clear that Britain was overstretching herself in her foreign commitments and measures were already being considered to reduce these. It was, however, the 1956 Suez Crisis which confirmed and accelerated the trend, although there is an historical debate on the extent to which Suez damaged British interests in the Middle East. A major factor in the changes in British defence policy after 1956 was the need to modernise Britain’s defences without increasing expenditure: this was to remain the most important theme for the next forty years. The turning point was the 1957 Sandys White Paper, which combined a streamlining of conventional forces with the adoption of nuclear weapons within a special relationship with the United States. A further acknowledgement of a declining world role came with the reduction and ending of imperial commitments in the early 1960s, which in turn meant that it made more sense for Britain to consider a closer defence relationship with Europe—a theme pursued by Conservative and Labour governments. The clinching argument was the economic crisis which seemed constantly to affect Britain after 1965.

After 1970 foreign policy took some strange twists (Chapter 18). At first a Conservative government under Heath tried to increase Britain’s defence role, only to be defeated by economic problems and the impact of the situation in the Middle East. Heath also gave priority to membership of the EEC. Wilson initially cut back on defence after returning to power in 1974, only for Callaghan to increase Britain’s commitment to European

defence—largely because of the declining role of US defence as a result of Carter’s presidency. Mrs Thatcher sought to honour previous commitments for increased expenditure and brought policy back to 1957. At the same time, she decided to upgrade nuclear weapons from Polaris to Trident. Since this accompanied increased expenditure on defence in Europe, the result had to be cuts in the navy. The South Atlantic therefore became the vulnerable area, which was exploited by General Galtieri in Argentina’s invasion of the Falklands in 1982. The war which followed briefly revived Britain’s military prestige and allowed Mrs Thatcher to claim that Britain had recovered some of her world standing as well. She cultivated a new friendship with the United States and emphasised the importance of Britain’s role in the Cold War. In reality, little had changed. Further defence cuts followed during the 1990s and the end of the Cold War seemed to reduce the need for Britain’s commitments in Europe. Future ‘rationalisation’—or contraction—seemed likely by the end of the century.

The counterbalance for decline as a world power was the search for a more distinctively regional role (Chapter 19). This inevitably meant closer involvement with Europe. But Britain sought this very much on her terms and consistently tried to avoid the integrationist pattern preferred by the continental states. Hence, during the 1940s Britain steered the first attempt at co-operation into a loose economic structure and a traditional style of military alliance, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). When, during the 1950s, the European Communities were formed by France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, Britain sought to develop a looser free trade area. During the 1960s and 1970s, however, Britain became convinced of the need to join the EEC, which was finally accomplished in 1973. Even then, Britain showed ant integrationist tendencies and there was some debate, analysed in Chapter 19, as to whether Britain actually gained on balance from membership.

The transition to a European state overlapped Britain’s decline as an imperial power (Chapter 20). Although the British Empire reached its greatest extent immediately after the First World War, a number of decisions had to be taken in the 1920s and 1930s about its future. The most successful of these was the confirmation and refinement of dominion status in the 1931 Statute of Westminster. Attempts to deal with other problems, such as the status of India and Palestine, were interrupted by the Second World War. After 1945 the European imperial powers experienced a wave of anti-colonial pressure. Britain reacted more positively than France or the Netherlands and the process of her decolonisation was therefore more orderly. It was also accompanied by the emergence of the Commonwealth, an organisation which was sufficiently loose and amorphous to adapt successfully to a post-colonial role.

Chapters 17 to 20 placed the focus on Britain’s external role. There is one further dimension to examine—an issue which was once internal but had become externalised. Ireland (Chapter 21) has consistently been the most complex regional problem faced by the United Kingdom. United with Britain by the 1800 Act of Union it seemed on course for Home Rule, when this was disrupted by the outbreak of war in 1914. The First World War radicalised the whole situation, bringing about the decline of the moderate Irish Nationalists and boosting the more extreme republicanism of Sinn Fein and, in strong opposition, the Ulster Unionists of the North. The result in 1922 was partition rather than Home Rule. Thereafter, the experience of the two parts of Ireland was very different. The South managed to overcome its extreme republicanism, to marginalise Sinn Fein, and to evolve into a moderate bipartisan system. The North, by contrast, remained dominated by inflexible Unionism until the outbreak of disturbances in 1968. Following the imposition of direct rule from Westminster in 1972, the British Government tried a variety of policies to resolve the problem, eventually arriving at an all-Irish solution, involving a complex relationship with the Irish Republic.

The two final chapters cover the political, social and economic changes experienced by women and by immigrants. The paradox here is that the actual majority of the population were treated over much of the twentieth century as minority groups. Between them these constituted over 60 per cent of the population. In each case there was a long haul to the achievement of equality and integration. In the case of women (Chapter 22), the political franchise, extended in 1918 and 1928, preceded the concession of other rights. Full social equality was achieved only during the 1960s and 1970s with a series of measures designed to remove direct or indirect discrimination in the workplace. By 1995 it still appeared that women’s opportunities, although much more broadly based, tapered very narrowly at the highest levels of industry, the professions and, despite Britain having a woman prime minister, in politics. Finally, Britain has always been a multi-cultural society, consisting as it has done of four home nations and a number of regional entities. But, as the centre of a worldwide empire, it attracted large numbers of immigrants from overseas (Chapter 23), paradoxically mainly after the process of decolonisation had started. Measures taken by the British government covered two separate—but related—issues: immigration and integration. Immigration controls were relaxed immediately after the Second World War in an effort to fill vacant posts with certain sectors, only to be tightened up from 1962 onwards. At the same time, legislation was introduced on race relations to ensure that discrimination was squeezed out. There was, however, a backlash, with pressure from minority groups for the repatriation of Commonwealth immigrants, and far right wing movements threatening and committing acts of violence against the black communities.

**TWO KEY ISSUES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

**Issue 1: British decline?**

It is a common assertion that Britain reached the peak of her economic strength between 1850 and 1875, before being gradually overhauled by a newly united Germany and a newly healed United States. During the forty years before the First World War, the main manifestations of British power were imperial and maritime: Britain had a worldwide commitment, while Germany came increasingly to dominate the Continent.

The First World War is often seen as the beginning of the long process of British decline (Chapter 1). If so, we should distinguish between economic decline, which was inexorable, and continuing political and military influence. In some respects, as Chapter 9 shows, Britain had never been better off by comparison with her rivals. Germany had been crushed, France was depleted, Russia had been through revolution and civil war, the United States was withdrawing into isolation. The British Empire was larger than it had ever been and the navy was as yet still larger than that of the United States. Yet, in many ways, this was all comparative. British strength existed because of German weakness: this did not last much beyond the beginning of the 1930s.

Meanwhile, British economic decline was an important factor between the wars (Chapter 8). Again, this was relative: the staple industries were fundamentally affected by the contraction of overseas markets, while the new industries began to take part of their place, but it was clear that Britain was slipping further behind the United States and Germany in the long-term economic perspective which goes back into the period before 1914.

All the same, the general balance was that between the wars Britain was still one of the world’s great powers. Could the same be said of the period after 1945? Here great-power status was a delusion. Because Britain had been one of the victorious Big Three during the Second World War, successive governments tried to join in the superpower stakes. Chapter 17 shows how Britain actually forced the pace of American foreign policy after 1945 and sought to maintain her imperial role. In the process, Britain chose not to become part of a regional grouping with other European states, thereby missing out on the earlier stages of European integration which were to prove such an important part in the recovery of Italy, France and Germany (Chapter 19).

Again, however, the economic base had contracted, this time to the point where Britain was forced to cut back on her overseas commitments. The process was already under way before the 1956 Suez crisis, but the latter confirmed that Britain’s role was in the process of fundamental change (Chapter 17). Documents like the 1957 Sandys White Paper called this rationalisation. The rest of the world saw it as decline. Decolonisation was another part of the process (Chapter 20); Dean Acheson’s much publicised view that Britain had lost an Empire but not yet found a role was characteristic of this.

Several developments followed the acknowledgement of decline. One was the adoption of nuclear weapons: Britain became a nuclear power because she acknowledged her decline on the world scene, not because she wished to prolong the pretence that she was a superpower (Chapter 17). Nuclear weapons placed the emphasis on defence, not active involvement. Unlike the United States and the Soviet Union, Britain did not after 1956 seek to increase her conventional forces as well. It was the latter which ensured continuing status as a major power, since only conventional weapons can be used in maintaining influence throughout the world. Thus it is significant that, as Britain adopted Polaris nuclear weapons systems in the 1960s, she also withdrew from east of Suez; as she upgraded Polaris to Trident in the 1980s, she also withdrew her presence from the South Atlantic (Chapter 18). Meanwhile, Britain sought to perpetuate her importance in a ‘special relationship’ with the United States. But this was also a manifestation of decline. Macmillan succeeded in persuading Eisenhower to accept this relationship in 1957, even though it had been rejected in 1947, precisely because Britain *was* in decline and no longer a challenge to American hegemony.

There were occasional attempts to revive Britain’s perceived importance. One example was Eden’s attempt in 1956 to reassert Britain’s primacy in the Middle East and frustrate the designs of Gamal Nasser (Chapter 17).

Another was Mrs Thatcher’s use of a highly opportune victory over Argentina in the 1982 Falklands War to revive British prestige (Chapter 18). On the other hand, any revival was illusory and it would be too much to say that Britain’s role subsequently expanded. Instead, regional commitments continued to be the main target. Even though Mrs Thatcher revived Britain’s status as junior partner of the United States and backed President Reagan’s tough stance in the Cold War, Britain played comparatively little part in the collapse of the Soviet Union. She was also unable to resist the inexorable cutting of defence expenditure to make way for other priorities.

These were the result of the more constant and insidious form of decline—economic. This was always there below the surface in the 1950s (Chapters 11 and 13), as the infrastructure of Britain’s world economic role had been severely damaged during the Second World War. The 1950s had disguised the decline, but a series of economic problems hit Britain almost continuously after the early 1960s (Chapter 14). In these circumstances active involvement on the world scene became an irrelevance, especially since, by the 1970s, Britain had, in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) fallen behind France and Italy as well as the United States, Japan and Germany. A comparison between Britain in 1914 and Britain in 1995 therefore shows that Britain had slipped from the position of a world power to that of regional influence on the outer fringes of Europe, while ‘the British Empire’ had been replaced by ‘the Commonwealth of Nations’ (Chapter 20). Decline is a descriptive term and clearly applies to Britain’s twentieth-century experience. Yet it is also highly loaded and politically charged. The right of the political spectrum tends to focus on the manifestations of decline as reduced involvement on the world scene, contracting armed forces and lower economic influence on the open and competitive market. The left, by contrast, would see ‘decline’ in these terms in a more positive light. It could be argued that decline has really meant the changing of priorities. For example, the cost of the welfare state was the contraction of British military prestige worldwide (Chapters 12 and 17); the recognition of Third World rights and nationalism was paid for by the quite deliberate process of decolonisation (Chapter 20) which, it should be remembered, was far smoother and less painful than that experienced by the French, the Dutch and the Belgians.

Decline can therefore be understood in the positive sense of maturing and moderating. These are gains which offset the losses of prestige which were once so important. The one factor which is constant to both, however, is the economic performance. Ultimately this is what caused the choices to be made which reflected Britain’s decline. It also cast positive light or negative shadows upon it.

**Issue 2: British consensus?**

One of the key concepts offered by modern political analysts is the operation of consensus in British politics and society, both between the two world wars and since 1945. In particular instances this is open to different interpretations and the details will be discussed in virtually every chapter. For the time being, a general statement of the argument may be advanced as follows.

Political consensus implies a general acceptance of certain broad principles by the major political parties within the electoral arena. It does not, however, mean agreement on all issues and there will be attempts made by each party to exploit certain differences for the sake of its own political identity. In particular, the traditional confrontational politics of the British parliamentary system has to be maintained. Consensus can therefore still be associated with conflict. At the same time, it prevents violent swings between government policies; instead there is an underlying continuity in the way in which governments dealt with the key areas such as the economy, industry, welfare, foreign policy and defence. There have been several distinct periods during the twentieth century when political consensus seems to have operated.

The first example was the First World War, during which a national emergency brought a suspension of party rivalries and the emergence of a coalition government under Lloyd George in 1916 (see Chapter 2). This continued well into peacetime, the Conservatives continuing to co-operate with the Lloyd George Liberals until 1922. There was thus a huge majority in Parliament for government policies. The ending of the coalition brought a different type of consensus, based upon a return to normal party politics. There were widespread fears that the rise of Labour would radicalise British politics and widen the gulf between left and right, but in fact the reverse occurred. The 1920s were generally a period of moderation and continuity. Baldwin, Prime Minister in 1923 and from 1924 to 1929, moved the ideas and policies of the Conservatives quite deliberately towards the central ground (Chapter 5). Labour moved towards the centre from the left when Ramsay MacDonald was in Downing Street in 1924 (Chapter 4) and between 1929 and 1931 (Chapter 7). It is true that there were instances of direct ideological confrontation, especially over the Zinoviev Letter in 1924 (Chapter 4) and the General Strike in 1926 (Chapter 6). But, by and large, the two main parties either pursued moderation to enhance their electoral support at the expense of the declining Liberal party (Chapter 3) or they had moderation forced upon them by the serious nature of the inter-war economic problems (Chapter 8). Indeed, the 1931 financial crisis imposed such political pressures that consensus was recast into something resembling the earlier coalition. The National Governments between 1931 and 1939 were based upon a broad electoral agreement between the Conservatives, most of the Liberals and a few Labour MPs; MacDonald won a huge majority in the general election of 1931 and Baldwin another in 1935. The National Government was eventually subsumed during the Second World War in Churchill’s coalition government. Based again on the needs of the moment, this was more widely based than the National Government, since it included representatives from the Labour party as a whole (Chapter 11).

The period after 1945 saw the return of the bipartisan system in which Labour and the Conservatives contested power against each other, with the Liberals ceasing for a while to have much impact. This did not, however, end the experience of consensus which had developed earlier; instead, consensus was redefined within an informal mode rather than as a National or coalition government. During the war there had been a broad measure of agreement about the need for future reforms and both the major parties accepted in broad terms the neo-Keynesian line of state intervention in economic and social issues. Attlee’s Labour government of 1945–51 did much to put into operation the basic measures of the welfare state and the National Health Service (Chapter 12). The Conservatives, it is true, resisted certain specific measures and fought especially hard against the nationalisation of the steel industry. But, when they resumed power in 1951, the Conservatives retained most of the reforms Labour had introduced (Chapter 13). It has been said that politics operated rather like a ratchet. Because undoing the Labour programme would have been so difficult, the Conservatives were forced to move their whole position leftwards. Some Conservative ministers, like Butler, MacLeod, and Macmillan, fitted well into this new consensus. The Labour leader, Gaitskell, in turn, resisted pressures to take the Labour party through to the radical left (Chapter 13). So strong was the overlap between Butler and Gaitskell that the phrase ‘Butskellism’ was coined. Party conflicts continued as normal, but the most serious disagreements were over external issues like the 1956 Suez Crisis.

Between 1964 and 1979, however, consensus wobbled badly without, as yet, being overturned. Faced with mounting economic problems, both Labour and the Conservatives sought initially to apply more radical measures, before being forced to move back towards the centre (Chapter 14). Wilson moved his 1964–70 administration further in the direction of government control, only to return to more traditional expedients. Heath (1970–4) at first tried to cut taxes and curb trade union powers but was forced to abandon these measures by the rise in oil prices and industrial unrest. Wilson attempted another shift to the left between 1974 and 1976, only for Callaghan (1976–9) to have to apply the sort of measures to try to bring about economic recovery which were considered almost right-wing. Consensus therefore reimposed itself despite attempts to break free from it. Beneath the surface, however, two important trends were occurring. One was the capture of the soul of the Conservative party by Mrs Thatcher, who won its leadership contest in 1975. Her ideas were based on monetarism rather than neo-Keynesianism, upon minimal rather than sustained government intervention to deal with key economic issues such as unemployment. The other was the swing of much of the Labour party to the left, preparing the way in the future for a major split within Labour’s ranks.

The 1979 general election brought to power a leader determined to replace consensus with ‘conviction politics’. Her three Conservative administrations, which lasted from 1979 to 1990, made monetarism and privatisation the key components of her economic policies (Chapter 15), while Labour resisted fiercely and, under Michael Foot (1981–4), moved strongly to the left (Chapter 16). Never at any point since 1918 had the ideologies of the two parties been so far apart and it seemed that the overlap between Baldwin and MacDonald, or between Butler and Gaitskell, had gone forever. Or had it? By 1991 it seemed that consensus was beginning to make a comeback—but for tactical rather than ideological reasons. The first move was made by Labour, as Kinnock expelled the far left. Smith and Blair continued the move back to the centre by accepting that at least some of Mrs Thatcher’s measures could not be undone in the future (Chapter 16). In effect, they were acknowledging the move of the ratchet to the right, just as the Conservatives in the 1950s had not been able to undo the ratchet to the left. The process was further assisted by the challenge to Mrs Thatcher’s position in 1990 and her replacement as Conservative leader and Prime Minister by the more moderate John Major (Chapter 15). The ideological and policy gap between the parties had narrowed by 1995, even though the polemics and personal attacks were as strong as ever. The question—still to be answered —was this: had consensus actually returned, or was it merely a political regrouping for a future migration from the central ground? An answer is attempted in Chapter 16.

The extent of consensus was, therefore, considerable in domestic policy, with the exception of the period between 1979 and about 1993. Did the same apply to foreign policy and defence? By and large it did. Labour strongly pressed Britain’s status as a great power during the 1940s (Chapter 17), with the Conservatives in full agreement. There was similar consensus over Britain’s involvement in the Korean War (1950–3). The Suez Crisis of 1956, it is true, attracted unanimous Labour criticism, but there were also misgivings within the Conservative party, resulting in the premature retirement of Eden in 1957. Labour could find little objection to the subsequent rationalisation of Britain’s military role which meant, in effect, the reduction of her conventional forces (Chapter 17). There was some controversy over Britain’s increase in nuclear weapons, but this was within the Labour party, not between the official policies of the government and the opposition. Indeed, the decision that Britain should be a nuclear power was originally taken by Attlee’s Labour administration and eventually seen through by Macmillan and the Conservatives, with the support of the leadership of the Labour opposition under Gaitskell.

Labour and the Conservatives followed broadly similar policies on conventional defence forces between 1964 and 1979 (Chapters 17 and 18); Heath aimed to expand Britain’s role slightly, but it was Labour under Callaghan which proposed an increase in the expenditure to give Britain a more credible European role.

All this seems to indicate that foreign and defence policies were pursued with some continuity between 1945 and 1979. But what about the period after 1979, when domestic consensus so obviously came apart? There are examples of the same thing happening in foreign policy (Chapter 18). The Labour party, under Foot, abandoned the traditionally accepted policy of nuclear deterrence, making defence for the first time one of the key issues of contention between the parties. On the other hand, consensus re-established itself in this area more quickly than over domestic issues.

Kinnock realised that Labour’s defeat in the 1987 general election was due partly to Labour’s feeble defence policy: acceptance of the nuclear deterrent therefore made a tactical return. Meanwhile, the Conservatives recognised that the state of the economy required further cuts in conventional defence expenditure—with which Labour could hardly quibble. A common factor in this new consensus was that defence was peripheral to the real battleground—domestic policies.

Consensus came more slowly over the issue of Britain’s involvement in the European Economic Community (Chapter 19). This was initially pressed most strongly by the Liberals and then adopted by Macmillan as official Conservative policy from 1960. Labour became converted after 1964; Heath’s Conservative government finally gained admission in the early 1970s; and Wilson’s second Labour administration renegotiated the terms in Britain’s favour in 1975. Britain’s move to Europe can therefore be seen as an inter-party issue, with opposition coming within parties—mainly from the Conservative right wing and the Labour left. After 1979 the Labour party as a whole projected a much stronger anti-European stance, especially between 1981 and 1987. But, as with defence, Kinnock saw the need to accept the current situation. This meant that the leadership of both the main parties, along with the Liberal Democrats, followed a policy which was pro-European, if suspicious of further integration. Again, the real conflict came within the parties, the anti-European element of the Conservatives doing much to embarrass Major’s administration in 1994.

In two areas there has been almost complete consensus throughout the period since 1945. One is Ireland, both parties condemning the policies of the IRA and favouring the progressive movement to the all-Ireland solution examined in Chapter 21. Another is the decision to decolonise and convert the British Empire into the Commonwealth of Nations (Chapter 20). Although there were factions within the two main parties which considered the pace to be too fast, or too slow, there was no fundamental disagreement between the parties themselves. Independence was given by Labour and the Conservatives in more or less equal measure.

Has there been social consensus, relating to social class, to gender and to ethnic origin? At first sight, such an idea might seem paradoxical, yet this is an area in which the debate is just as constructive as in politics and decision-making. On the one hand, social class might seem a very unpromising area for consensus, since it has remained more strongly based in Britain than in almost any other western state. On the other hand, it has been progressively reduced by the democratising effect of two world wars (Chapters 2 and 11) and by the political consensus on the need to redistribute wealth and establish the welfare state (Chapters 12 and 13). It would also be wrong to see social classes as a fixed entity. Instead, the boundaries between them are always changing and even the social categories of A, B, C1 and C2 are open to considerable re-interpretation.

The way in which social classes relate to political parties can also be misleading. The stereotypes of the Liberals and Conservatives as middleclass parties and Labour as the party of the working class will not do. The Conservatives have always had a substantial working-class base, while Labour has aimed to detach as many middle-class voters as possible. Public opinion polls indicate substantial shifts of voting behaviour at various

stages. Labour attracted a large part of the middle-class vote in the 1940s and again in 1965, while polls in 1994 and 1995 seemed to indicate that this trend was returning. The Conservatives won a large proportion of the working-class vote in the 1980s, amounting to an overall majority in 1983 (Chapter 15).

As controversial as social class is the issue of gender (Chapter 22). At the beginning of the century there was a broad disagreement between the parties on the issue of women’s suffrage. The Liberals opposed, Labour pressed their cause, while the Conservatives enjoyed the political discomfiture suffered by both. Enfranchisement was supported by all parties at the end of the First World War, but the subsequent development of social equality meant different things to different parties until a broad consensus emerged during the 1960s and 1970s with the pursuit of legislation on equal opportunities. Differences remained, but these were to be found within rather than between parties. Gender issues were not a fundamental question with most of the population, indicating that there was generally a consensus perhaps qualified by an underlying feeling that women were expected to carry an inequitable share of domestic work. At the fringes, however, were two influences which periodically moved towards the central ground and reduced the consensus. One was the influence of feminism, the other the pressure for the return of women to domestic and child-caring roles.

Potentially the most volatile issue is immigration and race relations (Chapter 23). Almost every country of mixed ethnic composition has seen periods of racial tension. Britain has been no exception, with periodic race riots, with the activities of the British Union of Fascists in the 1930s and the National Front in the 1970s, and the inner-city violence of the 1980s. On the other hand, these have been exceptional. The norm has been for steady integration and the absorption of the skills of ethnic communities within the economy. It could be argued that a consensus has developed about the rights of communities. Whether this actually means that integration has been achieved is, of course, another issue. As in all the cases referred to, Britain by 1995 was poised at a particular stage in her evolution where certain trends might be predictable in outline, but where variable and unknown external factors made alternative courses and patterns possible.