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1

English Questions

Eighty years ago, England was a country like every other . . .
Today it is a country like *no* other.

Friedrich Engels, 1844¹

For more than a century the great political causes in British politics were Empire, Socialism, Free Trade, Liberty and Reform. They are so no longer. If some of them still resonate, they do so in different ways. In the last twenty-five years British politics has been transformed, and a new political landscape has emerged. At the centre of this new landscape is the question of Britain's relation to Europe and to America, whether Britain can be a bridge between the two, or whether it has to choose between them. This book explores this question in relation to the historical path of development of British politics, and the imprint it has left on the British state, on British institutions, on British political parties and on British political ideologies. The relationship of Britain to Europe and America is not a matter simply of economics or of politics or of international relations: it goes to the heart of the political identity and political economy of this state formed over a very long period of development. It constantly gives rise to new defining issues in British politics, such as whether or not to join the euro, whether or not to support war against Iraq.

These dilemmas over relationships with Europe and America have moved centre stage as the historical decline of the British state proceeded and the Empire was dismantled. The post-imperial era has been marked by turbulence and trauma, as the British political class has struggled to adjust to the new position of the British state. Various political strategies were put forward, but the path which was followed has been mapped out by the governments of first Margaret Thatcher and then Tony Blair. In different ways they have been important catalysts for a set of changes which mark a watershed in British political development. The trajectory of British development has finally been broken, and a new order is struggling into being. The constitutional, territorial, ideological, political and economic forms so long established in British politics are changing.

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A second key feature of this new landscape is the changing relationship of England to the other nations of the United Kingdom. For a long while this relationship was expressed through successive forms of the empire state, first Great Britain and then the United Kingdom, both of them primarily vehicles for English expansion. But with the ending of that expansion and the weakening and contraction of the empire state, the relationship between the British nations has begun to be renegotiated. As the empire state has gradually unravelled it has been possible to glimpse the lineaments of a new Britain and a new British politics. It is in this context that the debate about Europe and America has moved to the centre of the stage.

This book offers a series of reflections on these changing forms and relationships of British politics, and their implications for Britain as a whole. It is a book about *British* politics, but it seeks to understand the future prospects of British politics by paying particular attention to the historical meaning of *England* and the English Question in that politics. The most pressing English Question of all is how England as a nation and as a territorial space should be governed following the devolution of powers to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and how Englishness should now be understood.² But there is also a more fundamental 'English Question', which is how England as an empire state, formed by a particular path of development, and at the meeting point of the four circles of Union, Empire, Anglo-America, and Europe is now reforming and adjusting to new problems and new challenges.

This broader idea of England is not just England as a separate nation within these islands, but England as a world island, the name for a unique state and political economy. Although England was never in reality a true geographical island, its special path of development made it a *world* island in its own perception of itself, and in the perception of others. It was an empire of territory and an empire of trade, a system of power extending over Britain and Ireland and large parts of the world, as well as an empire of ideas, the representation of an ideal and the creator of a model, the pioneer of institutions, principles and practices which were widely imitated throughout the world. In these ways England shaped the world and was in turn decisively shaped by it, while remaining in important respects insulated from it, a world *island*, and therefore an insular world of idiosyncratic customs, practices and beliefs. This paradox has been responsible for many of the peculiarities of English and British development.³

One of the key foundations for this unique empire state was the Union which drew in both the other two British nations of Wales and Scotland, as well as (for a time) the Irish. As a result this state has had many names – England, Great Britain, the United Kingdom. Because of its greater size,

wealth and population, England was inevitably at the heart of this state, its dominance reflected in many ways, not least in the common use of the term England as the shorthand term for the state. Its development has often been treated as so many phases in the expansion of *England*. Until quite recently histories of this state were generally entitled histories of England, even when written by Scots. Such usage derived from a particular reading of English history and the British political tradition, which is still powerful, although much weaker than it once was, a reading which emphasizes the uniqueness of England, and sees Britain as for the most part a vehicle for England. It is this idea of 'England' as an entity greater than itself, a world island, and the ways in which that has shaped and continues to shape British politics and frame its dilemmas, which this book explores.

The imperial expansion of England is now at an end, and the forms through which British politics has been conducted, and the ways in which Britain has traditionally been conceived, have begun to change. There are implications for all the British nations – the Scots, the Welsh and the Ulster Unionists – but especially for the English who for so long have not wanted to conceive of themselves as apart from the state and empire which they took the lead in creating. The unwillingness of the English to think about themselves separately from Britain, to see themselves as *a* British nation rather than *the* British nation, is at the heart of the English Question in British politics. The new forms of British politics that are developing are forcing a rethinking of the nature of England and its relationship with the rest of Britain, and raise questions about England's future now that the Empire is no more, and now that the other nations of Britain are in different ways beginning to disengage themselves and wanting to define anew the nature of Britain.⁴

The English Question in British politics is therefore the question of England's future, and Britain's status as a world island, following the end of expansion and of empire, and the fading charms of the English model. It presents a number of choices and dilemmas, which have implications not just for England but for the other British nations as well. The way in which they are resolved will help determine the future of Britain and its wider role in the world. These dilemmas may be summed up in the following way.

What should England *be* after Empire? Three centuries of expansion which built the Union within these islands and an Empire on which the sun never set gave the English many identities, and forged partnerships and links with many other nations. But the Empire has now dissolved and the Union is threatened. Should the English now accept that Britain is plural rather than singular, composed of several nations rather than one, and that its political institutions should be federal rather than unitary, based on a

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new partnership between the British nations of Wales, Scotland and England, and those others, from Northern Ireland to Gibraltar and the Falklands, who still define themselves as British? Or should the English gradually disengage from Britain and Britishness altogether, ultimately becoming an independent nation-state once again and recovering a separate sense of Englishness? Should they celebrate the new multicultural and multiethnic character which has become characteristic of the whole of Britain in recent decades, or should they reject it, trying to preserve as far as they can an ethnic and cultural homogeneity, based on whiteness and Protestantism? And how should these choices then connect to the great strategic questions which confront the British state? Should foreign policy be internationalist or nationalist? Should the British state remain the chief ally of the United States, and a bridge between it and Europe, or should it seek to disengage? Should it seek to be part of a wider European federation or stand outside?

What should England *do* after Empire? Successful union with the other nations of these islands helped pioneer the specific British forms of liberal capitalism, self-government, and democratic socialism, which once provided models and inspiration for many other countries, but which during the era of decline failed to adapt and came under sustained criticism and challenge. Should the Anglo-American model of a liberal capitalist economy be strengthened, or should it be radically reformed to make the British model more European? Should British democracy be improved by recovering the tradition of self-government it shares with America, or should the focus instead be on improving the effectiveness of government? Should the commitment to securing equal citizenship and reducing poverty be renewed to move Britain towards a European welfare system, or should the welfare state be dismantled to the level now reached in America?

What should England *dream* after Empire? All the British nations have had dreams, and some of them have been shared dreams. The ideal of Empire for the right and the counter ideal of socialism for the left were the great animating principles of British party politics through the twentieth century, the primary source of both emotional and intellectual commitment for the two warring camps. These were visions of two very different commonwealths and both now seem lost, in their earlier forms irretrievably, with the vanishing of England's status as a great power. The two leading parties of the state in the twentieth century, first Labour in the 1980s and then the Conservatives in the 1990s, have in turn suffered a dramatic collapse in their support and self-belief. In this altered political landscape what principles now frame the choice between the political parties in British politics? Do left and right still have meaning, or has politics now

moved beyond left and right?⁵ Is the real choice now between two forms of capitalism, two kinds of state, and two kinds of civil society – one European, one American?⁶

The other British nations, the Scots, the Welsh and the Ulster Unionists, are increasingly forming their own conception of what they want to be, to do and to dream. Although many individual Scots and Welsh, particularly those living outside Scotland and Wales, still identify themselves as British, and therefore with England, the achievement of a measure of self-government means that Scotland and Wales are beginning to be able to determine for themselves their own direction, and make their own choices. They are becoming aware that they no longer have to accept what England decides. They have a small but growing area of autonomy, and in the future their electorates could choose to disengage from the Union altogether. Whether that will happen depends to a large extent on what the English themselves decide on these questions. English choices will be crucial for the future direction of British politics, in helping to determine whether or not the other nations want to continue to be part of a shared British project. In this sense the future of Britain is largely in English hands.

British Politics and Decline

The supremacy of England in world affairs was built on the expansion of its power over three centuries, first through the building of a United Kingdom in the British Isles, and secondly through the expansion of the twin British empires of territory and trade. In the first half of the twentieth century this supremacy was irreversibly lost. The United Kingdom was not defeated in war or invaded, its constitution was not rewritten, and apart from the secession of Ireland from the Union, the outward forms of the British state remained the same. But the expansion of England was over, and British politics came to be dominated by the politics of decline. Drained by the effort of two world wars, British power shrank, its territorial empire was dismantled, and British military, industrial, technological, commercial, financial and cultural predominance were all lost. They were not lost all at once, and for the most part the political class persuaded itself that they were not lost at all, while gradually becoming preoccupied with managing the decline, conducting a long rearguard action in defence of what it knew and understood. There is no one date when this began, but 1931 stands out as a key moment. In that year the British Government had to admit defeat in its attempts to restore the gold standard. The direct link between the pound sterling and gold was broken, never to be restored, and

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hopes for a return to a unified liberal economic world order based on the gold standard were shattered. In deference to that lost order, Montagu Norman, the Governor of the Bank of England, never wore a top hat in public again.

What has perished with that lost order is a certain idea of England. The transition from Empire has been long and difficult, not just because of enforced withdrawal from so many territories which the British ruled, but also because of the gradual loss of self-confidence, the discarding of so many assumptions about the superiority of the British way of doing things. Decline coincided with the extension of democracy and the establishment of a welfare state, and the adoption of the term Britain as the preferred shorthand term for the United Kingdom, rather than England. Yet England could not be disposed of so easily. The empire state that had been constructed during the expansion of England still continued to cast a long shadow over British life and, although much weaker than before, it has continued to shape the attitudes and behaviour of the political class, which became inured to the experience of contraction rather than expansion, and to coping with its political, economic, ideological and psychological consequences.

After 1931 British politics gradually became dominated by the politics of decline and particularly so in three decades – the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. But in the last twenty years Britain has passed through a political revolution. The pattern of decline has been decisively broken by the administering of two successive shocks – the economic reforms begun by the Thatcher Government and the constitutional reforms begun by the Blair Government. There was nothing inevitable or preordained about these reforms. British politics might have developed in radically different ways. But a new path was set in the 1980s, even if both sets of reforms have had many consequences which were unintended by their authors and are still far from complete. Both were initiated from above by different elements of the political class, and are intimately related. The first in part engendered and in part provoked the second, and together they have transformed British politics and continue to transform it.

The process of change is by no means finished, but a decisive watershed appears to have been passed, and the framework of a new political order is visible.⁷ The Thatcher Government began the change, shattering the uneasy post-war social compromise between capital and labour by seeking to undo many of the reforms of the social democratic era, and to restore an Anglo-American model of capitalism and constitutional order, by calling for a return to ‘market disciplines’, and seeking by every possible means to discredit socialism as an alien and un-English creed, and

weaken its institutions and power base in the trade unions, the public sector, and local government.⁸ The Blair Government consolidated these free-market reforms, while at the same time developing a new agenda of equal citizenship which owed more to European than to American welfare models,⁹ continuing the modernization of the public sector and initiating the most far-reaching reforms of the constitution since the extension of the right to vote.¹⁰

Many commentators, particularly on the left, regard the Thatcher Government alone as radical, the Blair Government doing little more than completing the Thatcherite agenda. Without Thatcherism it is true the programme of the Blair Government would have been unthinkable, but the Blair Government has done more than simply embed Thatcher's reforms. Despite its conservative inclinations it embarked upon a process of constitutional change which goes much wider than the Thatcherite agenda, and has produced reforms likely to prove as fundamental and lasting as anything achieved by the Thatcher Government. While the Thatcherites sought to protect the old constitutional state and breathe new life into it, the Blair Government initiated changes which have begun to alter some of its fundamental principles and structures.

The changes being introduced by this political revolution have been extremely controversial because they express fundamental judgements about the kind of society contemporary Britain is and fundamental choices about the kind of society it should become, and have consigned to the rubbish heap many things in which people on right and left used passionately to believe. Like all political revolutions there are many on both left and right who refuse to accept the changes and keep believing that what has occurred can be reversed. They hope a counter-revolution is still possible, and that their political values can again triumph.

It is sometimes said that the English do not have revolutions, only evolutions. But revolutions come in various forms, and a cursory knowledge of both English and British history reveals no shortage of them. Revolution in its original political sense means a spin of the wheel of fortune and circumstance, an instance of great change in political affairs, the creation of a new political landscape, a new order. Political revolutions are often dramatic events because government is seen to change hands, but that alone is not enough in itself to constitute a political revolution. The new government must put in place a new *régime*, a set of rules and principles which establish a new political, ideological, economic, and cultural order.

In 1688 the English termed the overthrow of James II '*The Glorious Revolution*'. After more than forty years of political upheaval and civil war which included the execution of one king, the restoration of another and the

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deposing of a third, as well as the establishment of a republic and the proclamation for the first time of principles of liberty, democracy and popular sovereignty, the Glorious Revolution initiated a new constitutional settlement based on the principles of the supremacy of Parliament and the Anglican religion, an undivided and unlimited sovereignty, commercial freedom and colonial expansion. The political upheaval of the last forty years has been on a more modest scale, but has contained moments of high drama such as the deposing of Margaret Thatcher in 1990 triggered by the Conservative civil war over Europe, and the Iraq crisis of 2003, triggered by the equally long-running Labour civil war over America. It has brought about the beginnings of a new constitutional settlement, based on the principles of shared sovereignty within the United Kingdom and Europe, multiculturalism and human rights, the primacy of markets, and equal citizenship. The question of the priority to be accorded Europe and America remains unresolved, and sharply divides both parties and public opinion.

The weakening of decline as an issue in British politics has come about through this political revolution; the first stage initiated by the right and the second by the left. The Thatcher Government bulldozed many of the policies and the institutions which had underpinned the post-war compromise between labour and capital in Britain, and helped to drive Labour into a damaging split and electoral collapse. For a time it appeared that Labour might cease to be an alternative governing party and become a rump party confined to its declining industrial heartlands. But the Thatcher revolution contained the seeds of its own destruction. It sought to drive socialism out of British politics by crippling the trade unions, reining back state intervention and public spending, and re-establishing the moral superiority of private over public provision. At the same time, it sought to restore national independence and the capacity of government by reaffirming the traditional doctrines of the undivided and unlimited sovereignty of the Westminster Parliament, and so attempting to breathe new life into the old imperial state. In doing so it overreached itself, weakening many traditional Conservative institutions and the base of Conservative support, and causing a deep questioning of the legitimacy of the Thatcher regime, and an outburst of new thinking on the constitution. At the same time, it provoked a huge split in its own ranks over its policy towards Europe.¹¹ It prepared the ground for Labour's revival in the 1990s and for the divisions and self-destruction of the Conservative party that accompanied it.

The Blair Government accepted most of the changes which the Thatcher revolution had begun; no counter-revolution on economic policy was attempted, and several of the changes were pushed further. But a new

revolution was initiated, only this time it was the old constitutional state, one of the traditional bedrocks of Conservatism, which became the target. The modernization of the British Constitution, which revived many aspects of the agenda which the Liberals had been pursuing before 1914, as well as marking a more positive engagement with Europe, has begun to transform the context within which British politics is conducted.¹² In the short space of twenty-five years between 1976, the year of the IMF Loan, and 2001, the year when a Labour government won a full second term for the first time, many of the ideological and the constitutional contours of British politics had been radically changed and with them the nature of the parties and the policies of the British state.¹³ This book analyses these changes and the debates around them, in order to chart the current dilemmas and the future directions of British politics. At the heart of these dilemmas is the fateful choice between Europe and America, which touches almost everything in British politics – security, political economy, civil society and identity.

Identity and Political Economy

To understand this changed landscape properly, and the choices it presents, it is necessary to explore England's understanding of itself as a world island; how the different identities of the English as well as the other British nations were shaped by England's participation in four overlapping circles – Union, Empire, Anglo-America, and Europe. The end of Empire has necessitated a fundamental reorientation of those relationships, and the posing of new questions about the identities of the English.¹⁴ The identities which arose from Union and Empire which underpinned the expansion of England and the idea of Britishness for more than three centuries have been called into question by devolution, by decolonization, by immigration, and by European integration. As the political extensions of 'England' have crumbled, so England itself has re-emerged into the spotlight. Ireland has long defined itself as separate, but now Scotland and to a lesser extent Wales, also begin to define their interests differently from England. With the end of its Empire the English are being forced to rediscover themselves and define themselves afresh in relation to 'Britain' and the other nations of Britain. Britain is no longer simply England, even for the English. These dilemmas over identity also involve strategic choices in political economy and between them they define the key questions of contemporary British politics. It is the way these questions are answered that defines its new terrain.

Union

The first of these questions arises from the Union that gave rise to that empire and to Great Britain. As already noted, this is the current form of the English Question, but it is also the Scottish Question and the Welsh Question: how far is Britain now dissolving into its separate nationalities? As nationalisms of various kinds have grown in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, there has been a gradual realization that the very heart of England's empire, the Union between the nations of the British Isles, is potentially unstable and could be dissolved.¹⁵ The English have always tended to use the terms Britain and British as synonymous with England and English, but this depended on the other nations being content to be part of this multinational project. If they are not, Britain and British become redundant, and the way is open for an explicit English nationalism alongside Scottish, Welsh and Irish nationalism. These questions over the Union invite a range of responses. The United Kingdom has always been a multinational state, but it has also been a unitary state, in the sense of having a single centre of authority, based on London and the institutions of the earlier English state. Can it be preserved with that central authority intact, as the Conservatives hoped; can a new form of partnership between the nations be devised through devolution, allowing a new Union and a new conception of Britain to develop; or is the logical end of devolution an independent Scotland and an independent England once again?

Empire

A second question is whether Britain is any longer ethnically and culturally homogenous, or should seek to be so. Is Britain one culture or many? Abroad the last vestiges of Empire have almost gone, but the Empire is still a deep presence in British politics, and a deep influence on Scottish, Welsh and English identities. Immigration is one example. With the extensive immigration from Commonwealth countries which has occurred since 1950, the Empire has come home, and Britain has increasingly become a multicultural and multiethnic society, although one where allegiance is often to Britain rather than to England, Scotland or Wales.¹⁶ Many individuals from ethnic groups identify themselves as British, and will call themselves Asian British or Black British but are much less likely to consider themselves English or Scottish.¹⁷ Multiple identities have become common which means that Britain is no longer a primary identity for significant minorities of UK citizens. Will Englishness adjust to multiculturalism, or will there be a populist reaction on national lines, and the rise of

England First and Scottish First movements, of the kind that many other European countries have experienced? Can multiculturalism be incorporated as part of equal citizenship, or does it destroy the possibility of equal citizenship?

A question also arises over the foreign policy stance of the British state with the waning of Empire. Should the priority be the preservation of what remains of British imperial interests and spheres of influence? Should the British state embrace liberal internationalism, intervening to protect human rights whenever this is considered appropriate? Or should a British state that understands itself as multinational and multiethnic seek to dismantle British imperial interests and connections and move to neutralism in its foreign policy, as Ireland did long before?

Anglo-America

A third question concerns Anglo-America. How far are the nations of the United Kingdom becoming absorbed by America, both in the cultural sense but also as part of a US dominated world order? England and the other British nations of the United Kingdom, as well as Ireland, are tied very closely to the United States, once itself part of Greater Britain. With the other English-speaking nations around the world they are part of Anglo-America, a transnational space of ideological and cultural argument and exchange, of trade and investment, and security and political ties. Should the British political class, even with the Empire gone and the domestic Union fragile, continue to try and sustain the Anglo-American hegemony which under British leadership in the nineteenth century, and American leadership since the 1940s has sought to maintain a world order that is relatively open and liberal, and in the last fifty years has also sustained a strong military alliance? Or should they throw in their lot with Europe, economically, politically and militarily? In the political class opinion is divided between those who want the United Kingdom to become closer than ever to the United States, even the fifty-first state;¹⁸ others want to maintain a special relationship while safeguarding UK independence and forging links with Europe;¹⁹ while a third group are far more critical of the United States and of the hegemony of neo-liberal ideas, and want the UK to disengage from it.²⁰

Europe

A fourth question, increasingly strongly linked to the third, is Europe. How European are the English and the other British nations? Successive

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British governments have tried to avoid the choice between Anglo-America and Europe, but as European integration has gathered pace, so has there been increasing pressure to decide the priority to be given to the Atlantic Alliance and the European Union. Again opinion in the political class has been sharply divided over whether the United Kingdom should eventually be absorbed into a European federal union, with the UK being broken up into its component regions, and Wales and Scotland becoming European region-states. A small group favours an explicit federal future, a much larger number argue for continuing integration but on the basis of a looser intergovernmental federation which keeps the United Kingdom together as a unified bloc within the European Union; a significant minority argues that the UK should continue to stand outside the single currency and block further integration, being prepared if necessary to withdraw from the European Union altogether.²¹

The English Model

These questions about identities in British politics are also questions about the political economy of the United Kingdom, because they involve the unravelling of the old political economy of the UK, the organization of state and economy built up in the three hundred years of expansion. England was a world island not only because it expanded into the world, but also because it became a model which was widely imitated. It represented certain institutions and principles which many other countries strove to copy – liberal capitalism and self-government in the nineteenth century, democratic socialism in the twentieth. All of these were British rather than purely English, but they were treated by many outside observers from de Tocqueville to Marx as the hallmarks of ‘England’, the unique political constellation that for a time in the nineteenth century was leading the world.

Capitalism

England came for example to be widely regarded as the most important pioneer of capitalism, the first economy to industrialize, and the first to establish a commanding technological, commercial and financial dominance. Capitalism in fact like empire was a *British* not simply an English project, involving all the nations of the United Kingdom, but it became a defining characteristic of ‘England’. During the long economic decline in

the twentieth century, British capitalism was clearly ailing and most of the old industrial base was lost. The great firestorm of the 1980s, encouraged by the Thatcher Government, restructured British capitalism, destroying many industries that remained, and reorganizing the financial and services sector.²² The Conservatives sought to remove obstacles to unfettered capital accumulation, and to strengthen the authority and capacity of the state. They relied increasingly on an Anglo-American model of capitalism with its emphasis on privatization, deregulation, low taxation, and shareholder value. Conservative policies succeeded to the extent that a new and more stable political economy was established, and for a time in the 1990s the British economy became one of the better performers among the leading capitalist economies. The economic decline relative to other leading economies was halted, although many doubted that the structural weaknesses of the economy had been permanently overcome, especially since productivity remained low in comparison either with other European economies or with the United States.²³ But the steady growth after 1992 and the euphoria about the Anglo-American model during the dotcom boom for a time dispelled British pessimism.

Self-government

England was one of the first countries in Europe to experience a Republic – the Commonwealth established under Oliver Cromwell in the 1650s – although it proved shortlived. England also after 1688 pioneered representative and parliamentary government, but within a constitution which retained the monarchical principle of undivided and unlimited sovereignty. This English Constitution unchanged in its essentials for three centuries became the framework for the multinational United Kingdom state, and is only now being reformed by the Blair Government, in ways which will make it more similar to constitutions in other states, ending some of its more obvious eccentricities, and through the provisions of devolution formally recognizing the multinational character of the United Kingdom. Debate continues to swirl around the reforms. Have they changed the substance or only the outward form of the constitution? Is a more balanced and less centralized political system coming into being, or has the tradition of self-government been destroyed? Is Britain passing under the control of alien powers, or is it on course to become a modern democracy and even a republic, as England briefly was once before, and as America became when it broke away from Britain?

Socialism

Ever since Engels wrote *The Condition of the English Working Class* in 1844,²⁴ England was renowned for having the first and largest industrial proletariat, and became a pioneer of forms of working-class organization and of socialist programmes for instituting a socialist commonwealth and welfare state. Like capitalism and empire, the working-class movement was a British not just an English phenomenon, and another of the elements which breathed real content into the Union. The long campaign of the Labour movement reached its climax in the reforms of the Attlee Government after 1945, and the emergence of a compromise between capital and labour, which gave the United Kingdom its first taste of social democracy. After this compromise broke down in the 1970s, the Thatcher Government unleashed the reforms and the economic restructuring which severely weakened Labour's power base in the trade unions and local authorities, but failed to dismantle the main structures of the welfare state, initiating instead a far-reaching modernization of the public sector, which has been carried forward by the Blair Government. A new compromise between labour and capital has emerged. The nature and stability of this compromise are controversial. Many on the left see it as preparing the way for the privatization of public services, and for the extension of the market principle into the public domain.²⁵ Others regard it more optimistically as providing new ways of managing the public sector to deliver what citizens want, and new strategies for remedying inequality to create a modernized but still universalist welfare state, which would be closer to European than to American models.²⁶

Left and Right

In the last phase of Empire, the era of decline, the two parties which dominated British politics were Labour and the Conservatives. Each projected a starkly different ideal – for the Conservatives it was the British Empire itself, the culmination of England's expansion; for Labour it was the dream of realizing a socialist Commonwealth in Britain. The compromise between these two visions allowed the preservation of the imperial state alongside the establishment of a welfare state.

In the 1980s and 1990s this political compromise unravelled, with huge consequences for the political parties. Both in turn suffered catastrophic defeats, and a meltdown in their support. Political alignments have been recast, the two-party system no longer functions in the way it did, and a

multi-party system has grown up. These changes have raised many issues. Are those rival dreams of left and right that dominated the twentieth century, of empire and socialist Commonwealth, now discredited, and no longer persuasive? If so, what do left and right currently mean in British politics? Is the Blair Government a continuation of Thatcherism by other means or a new form of progressive politics? Will the Conservatives survive as the main opposition force and alternative government in British politics? Are democracy and popular participation in politics withering, and new forms of rule emerging, with politics becoming the preserve of narrow political, corporate and media elites, as in America; or is Britain threatened with the rise of right-wing populism as in many parts of Europe?²⁷ Above all, are the models to which left and right subscribe increasingly European or American? Are the fault-lines between Europe and America or within them?

Plan of the Book

The book analyses the different ways in which Britain has come to be *between* Europe and America, and how this sets up a range of dilemmas which increasingly frame British politics.

Chapter 2 sets out the main argument about the historical path of England's development, analysing the roots and characteristics of English exceptionalism through a detailed exploration of the different senses in which England came to imagine itself and be seen by others as a 'world island', firstly by constructing in partnership with the other British nations of these islands a multinational Great Britain, and then a much wider Greater Britain, acquiring in the process a global reach and a global influence; secondly by becoming a model for the rest of the world; and thirdly, by remaining an insular and idiosyncratic world, with its own distinctive institutions, customs and beliefs. The next four chapters, 3, 4, 5 and 6 explore the four circles – Union, Empire, Anglo-America and Europe – and show how English exceptionalism has been defined and shaped by them, and how they frame the key dilemmas of identity and political economy in contemporary British politics. Chapter 7 analyses 'the English model', the ways in which 'England' showed to the rest of the world the image of its own future through the models of liberal capitalism, self-government, and democratic socialism it pioneered – and the fate of those models today, and how they are increasingly European or American in character. Chapters 8 and 9 examine how the rival traditions of right and left in British politics responded to decline, coped with the traumas induced by the loss of empire

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and the loss of socialism, and have begun to renew themselves, with the various conflicts over Britain's relationship with Europe and America often providing the main dividing lines. Chapter 10 asks whether there is life after Empire, after socialism, and after decline, and whether there is a radically different kind of England, and a new Britain, in the making, what its politics will be like, and whether its future is more likely to be American or European.

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