

# Why Churchill still matters: the power of the past and the postponement of the future

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The Churchill industry traps us in the past, and hinders the development of a collective future

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**W**inston Churchill seems alive and still with us; his image, voice and persona are ever present in contemporary Britain. There is now a highly successful Churchill industry, marketing and repackaging the man and his image - and in the process illuminating much about modern Britain: how we see ourselves, our past, and our place in the world.

Churchill had a long and varied political career, involving two periods as a Conservative and one as a Liberal. He was a front-bencher in each party, and was both a Tory rebel and on two occasions a Tory prime minister (1940-45 and 1951-55). Yet for all the mythologising, and all the efforts to make him into a legend, the dominating public accounts of Churchill - who was clearly a significant figure for a considerable period of time - concentrate on a very narrow period, namely his wartime contribution as prime minister, and the wilderness years before the Second World War when he was opposing Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasement.

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This selective remembering of Churchill is a common fate for leaders past and present. What, if anything, will today's politicians be remembered for? Theresa May will perhaps become a footnote within the Brexit story; Gordon Brown will be forever associated with the banking crash; and Tony Blair will never remove the stain of his deception and disinformation over the Iraq war.

But something more deep-seated is at work in the framing of Churchill and the trials and tribulations he faced in 1940. This has become a foundation story of Britain, the notion of 'our finest hour' and of 'standing alone' against the Nazi behemoth. The story itself is misleading: even in the dark days of June 1940, Britain faced Hitler with the Empire, colonies and dependencies, and all their resources and manpower, standing firmly behind her. Nevertheless this has been the image presented then and ever since, as the good story of Britain: of principle, idealism and determination, winning out against all the odds. It is not very surprising, then, that in the years of relative decline and disappointment of the post-war period, the heroism of Churchill has been invoked to inspire and provide an example of leadership.

Lest we imagine that such romanticising of the past is only found on the right, we should remember the grip of nostalgia and selective collective memories on the left too, where there is an equal fascination for the dead, and for a mythical past. The emergence of the Corbyn leadership, and with it a conscious rejection of the party's more recent experiences, in particular during the New Labour era, has given impetus to a search for alternative histories. Hence the reification of Clement Attlee, and a whole mini-world of 'what would Keir Hardie do' memes. We live in a society which has become fearful of the future and of change, and instead seeks sanctuary in imagined and contested versions of the past - whether of right or left. It is highly possible that this trend will get worse before it gets better, but eventually we will have to break this stranglehold, and begin to devise new political stories and visions; to find narratives capable of confronting the multiple crises of British politics and society, including the crisis in the 'idea' of Britain itself.

### **The Churchill industry, *Darkest Hour* and the legend of 1940**

There are many Winston Churchills. There is Churchill the buccaneering Empire adventurer and imperialist, and Churchill the military strategist who was at least

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partly responsible for the folly and tragedy of Gallipoli. There is the Liberal reformer, but there is also the man who stood against organised labour, from Tonypandy to the General Strike, and was indifferent to hardship and suffering. There was Churchill the rebel of the 1930s 'wilderness years', and Churchill the premier in his Indian summer of the 1950s. But towering above all of these is the Churchill of the Second World War, and in particular, of the events of 1940.

There is now a burgeoning Churchill industry, much of which is focused on that very specific period. In 2017 Churchill was portrayed in the film of the same name by Brian Cox; the post-war Churchill featured heavily in Netflix's first series of *The Crown* released at the end of 2016; and, most recently, he was played by Gary Oldman in the 2017 film *Darkest Hour*.

*Darkest Hour* concentrates on the watershed period in the Second World War, in May 1940, when the Chamberlain government tottered and then collapsed, Churchill became prime minister, and the war cabinet debated whether to continue the war effort or to seek out peace terms. This is a critical period, and one that has been endlessly studied and examined: for example it was covered in-depth by John Lukacs in *Five Days in London, May 1940*, published in 1999, and more recently by Nicholas Shakespeare in *Six Minutes in May: How Churchill unexpectedly became Prime Minister*.<sup>1</sup>

*Darkest Hour* bravely opens with Labour leader Clement Attlee concluding the parliamentary debate that brought down Chamberlain as prime minister (known as the Norway debate, as its subject was the disastrous British campaign fought in Norway, for which Churchill, as First Lord of the Admiralty, was largely responsible). This parliamentary occasion, which lasted over two days in May 1940, was one of the great House of Commons moments. People's speeches, and the responses they received from the House, had consequences. Tory rebel Leo Amery concluded his intervention by urging Chamberlain (and repeating the words of Cromwell to the Long Parliament in 1653): 'In the name of god, go'. (In the September 1939 debate just before Britain declared war on Germany, when it seemed that Chamberlain was still wavering, Amery had called on the Labour deputy leader Arthur Greenwood to 'Speak for England' - with the clear implication that Chamberlain and the Tories had been failing in their patriotic duty.)

Chamberlain won the vote at the end of the debate, by 281 to 200. But this only showed that parliamentary winners can be losers, and vice-versa, for, underneath the

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headline victory, forty-odd Tories had voted with Labour in the midst of war, while a greater number had abstained. Chamberlain's attempt to stay in office was doomed, even though he struggled on for a few days, unsuccessfully trying to bring Labour into a coalition government: they would only agree to do so in a government led by someone other than Chamberlain.

*Darkest Hour* is good on the parliamentary machinations when Britain was under greatest threat: cinematically the film showcases a dark, claustrophobic *House of Cards*. It illuminates the fundamental differences and personal tensions between Churchill, Chamberlain and Lord Halifax. (Halifax was foreign secretary until Churchill became prime minister, and had been widely seen and favoured as his natural successor.)

Churchill became prime minister on 10 May 1940 - the day Hitler invaded the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and France. In subsequent discussions, Chamberlain and Halifax pushed hard for Britain to consider finding out what terms Hitler would consider as a basis for peace talks. Halifax is well portrayed in the film, where - in a criticism that at the time seemed sensible to many - he is seen to dismiss Churchill's florid rhetoric, his offer of nothing more than 'words and words and only more words'. All three men were of course acting from a desire to preserve Britain's Empire and its global role.

But the weakness of *Darkest Hour*, as with so many other popular accounts, is that, despite opening with Clement Attlee, it mostly ignores the critical role of the Labour Party in these debates. Yet it is impossible to fully understand and comprehend each stage of the events of May 1940 without giving proper space to the Labour leadership and wider party. Clement Attlee opened the Norway debate for the opposition; and it was Labour, after the debate, which forced the vote of no confidence that altered the course of British history.

It was Labour's no-compromise attitude, its refusal to enter coalition government unless Chamberlain resigned, which forced the prime minister to go. It was Labour - after Attlee had gone to the Labour Conference then taking place and consulted its National Executive Committee (a good story for Corbynistas) - that made the ultimate decision not to go into coalition with Chamberlain, but to support coalition under a new PM. Thus Labour played a pivotal role not only in bringing Chamberlain down, but also in aiding Churchill's entry into Downing Street.

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If that were not enough (and here *Darkest Hour* badly fails), Labour members Attlee and Greenwood were central in the following War Cabinet discussions on continuing the war. In nine War Cabinet discussions over three days, Chamberlain and Halifax made the case for finding out what Hitler's peace terms might be, while Attlee and Greenwood stood with Churchill. Fascinatingly, at a time when Clement Attlee's stock has never been higher - and when his patriotism has been celebrated in John Bew's recent biography - this watershed moment for Britain, and Labour's role in it, is often passed over.<sup>2</sup> *Darkest Hour* tells part of this story, but in a partisan way: it only tells it from a Tory perspective.

There are many forgotten Churchill stories, just as there are many finest hours. To the untold Churchills already noted we must also add the anti-Labour politician who ended up working closely in coalition with the Labour Party. Paul Mason offers an insight into this contradiction in his observation that Churchill was a 'flawed elitist' whose genius in 1940 was that, as well as understanding the military situation, he also understood the 'dynamics of the British class system and what kept working class radicalism in check'.<sup>3</sup>

There is in all of this the constant of the Churchill of the ruling class: a man of privilege and Empire who presided over the decline of the former and demise of the latter. As Anthony Barnett wrote in *Iron Britannia*, 'Churchill fought tooth and nail to defend the Empire, but in the end - to save British sovereignty itself - he formed, and was a prisoner of, a politics which accepted the liquidation of the Empire ...'.<sup>4</sup>

### Living in the shadow of Churchillism

Churchill's death in January 1965 seemed to finally dispel the shadow that the Second World War had continued to cast over British society; and it was also a marker of the passing of a specific class and generational grip on what it was to be British. In those pre-Diana times of non-public emotion, his funeral on 30 January brought out hundreds of thousands of people - quietly showing their respects, visiting his coffin in Westminster Hall and lining the streets.

Also always present, if often unstated, is the Churchill of England as Britain, reflected in Harold Macmillan's eulogy upon hearing of Churchill's death in 1965: 'England without Winston! It seems impossible. Not even the oldest of us can remember England without him as a considerable figure.'<sup>5</sup> Richard Crossman

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commented in his diary, 'It felt like the end of an epoch, possibly even the end of a nation'.<sup>6</sup> Roy Jenkins, looking back on the funeral, wrote that it was 'the last in the British tradition of imperial ceremony', following on from the non-royal funerals of Gladstone in 1898 and the Duke of Wellington in 1852.<sup>7</sup>

Fifty years after his death, in January 2015, the anniversary was commemorated with a naval flotilla and an extreme solemnity that pointed to Churchill's continuing importance: this is a level of reverence that could not be imagined today for any other politician, living or dead. The only other figure capable of attracting such reverence is the Queen.

But other Churchills have been deliberately allowed to fade from memory. Churchill's stand against the appeasement of Nazism in the 1930s may be central to the myth, but it is less well-known that his near-decade of rebelliousness began before the emergence of Hitler's Germany. Its origins lay in an issue that was completely separate from the question of standing up to dictators and their military aggression. In fact, Churchill ceased to play a part in the Tory front bench from the point when the party went into opposition in 1929. And the issue on which he chose to part company with his colleagues was the, then contentious, issue of Indian self-government. Then as now the Tory right took a wholly uncompromising stand on sovereignty, and they regarded any serious move towards Indian autonomy within the British Empire as undermining British power and prestige. This was the view with which Churchill aligned himself, and he therefore opposed the proposals that eventually found their way into the National government's Government of India Act of 1935, which offered the diluted versions of Indian self-government advocated by the 'moderate right'. Churchill stood with an imperialist certainty against even these limited proposals, making a stand on what can only be described as anti-democratic grounds.

The Churchill of the Dundee years (1908-22) represented the city as Liberal MP at a time when parliamentarians had no need to even visit their constituencies, let alone live in them. He visited only occasionally, usually staying in the Queens Hotel in the city's West End. His defeat in 1922 at the hands of Prohibitionist Edwin 'Neddy' Scrymgeour is one of the great radical stories of that city (and one my parents told me with pride when I was growing up in Dundee, my father Edwin having being named in Scrymgeour's memory). T.E. Lawrence's response was to say, 'What bloody shits the Dundeeans must be'. Churchill, on the other hand, felt that,

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given the life 'the Dundee folk have to live', they had 'many excuses'.

Though Churchill is possibly the most invoked Tory in history, in 1940 he represented much more than Toryism. Anthony Barnett coined the term 'Churchillism' to describe the national spirit which emerged at that key moment - as something that was distinct from the man. Churchillism was a national compact which brought together Tories, Liberals, Labour and other elites in a project which incorporated organised labour in return for economic and social rights such as the setting up of the welfare state. But the context of the compact also included the passing of global leadership to the USA, with the invention of the so-called 'special relationship' (a term coined by Churchill) and the beginning of UK subservience to the national interests of the US.

If it hadn't been for 1940 and Hitler, history would not have been kind to Churchill. It would have regarded him as a reckless military adventurer, with memories of Gallipoli enduring as a stain on his reputation; and he would have been recognised as an unreconstructed British imperialist, out of touch in the 1930s even with most Tories. Then there is his record on trade union and labour issues. Yet, George Orwell, as he often did, got it right when he wrote after the war that Churchill was a 'tough and humorous old man', whom the British people 'would not accept as a peacetime leader but whom in the moment of disaster they felt to be representative of themselves'.<sup>8</sup>

As Britain's attempts at renewal and modernisation have faltered over the years - from eventual dissatisfaction with the post-war settlement to rejection of the efforts at change of Thatcherism and Blairism - popular folklore has returned again and again to the summer of 1940 and the appeal of Churchill. Similarly, it isn't surprising, in the light of Labour's checkered record in office since the 1945 administration, that the legend of Clement Attlee has grown steadily.

When the past is conjured as costume drama, or the heroic fight against the ultimate forces of darkness, it tells us something significant about Britain today. It points to a chronic failure of progress, and the absence of any belief that the current state can be collectively changed, or that we can avoid the abyss that appears to be opening up in front of us. It says that the best days of Britain, when there was purpose and clarity, are long gone; and it underlines a belief that there are no current good stories. This obsession with the past is thus a diminishing one, which damages the contemporary body politic.

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The veneration of Churchill illuminates how far Britain has declined, as well as the hold that its ruling classes once had but have now lost. Churchillism - the perspective that sprang from May 1940 - was born, like Gaullism, in a time of desperation and anxieties over national humiliation. But in the post-war era, Churchillism showed a pragmatism which allowed it to engage in imperial retreat and the making of the welfare state; this was evidence of a scale of adaption and change that is beyond those now notionally in charge of Britain.

That is the frightening, underlying, message of these films that is most relevant today. Who is there in our political classes who can talk about principles, show vision and invoke an emotive rhetoric that speaks beyond party and narrow calculation? At this time of crisis and doubt in Britain, there is no prominent leader who can, to paraphrase Leo Amery, speak for Britain. That kind of ability seems much rarer in the fraught Brexit Britain of 2018 than it was in the summer of 1940, and therein lies the contemporary problem; and this is what underpins the yearning for an age where everything seemed much more certain.

### **Churchill, Brexit and the demise of ‘the conservative nation’**

Churchill is alive and present in debates around Europe. He is cited both by pro-Europeans for his support of European unity, and by Eurosceptics who claim to be the living equivalent of his defiant upholding of British independence. The memory of Churchill is also used to invoke different interpretations of Conservatism: as with Hardie and Attlee in the Labour Party, every perspective within the Tories tries to lay claim to the great man. But there are parts of his legacy in which none of them are interested. Churchill accommodated with organised labour not only in wartime but in the aftermath of the Attlee government. He reluctantly accepted the principles and framework of the Beveridge Report, laying the basis for the moderation of Conservatism between 1945 and 1970, which accepted the post-war consensus. This Churchill isn't the one cited by modern day Tories.

Instead, because of his wartime leadership, determination and principle, Churchill is invoked by the most radical Tories as proof of the power of human will, not compromising, and being prepared to stand out against the prevailing groupthink. As moderate Conservatism has declined over the last forty years, so - first under Thatcher, then by her disciples - Churchill has been appropriated to

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invoke a belligerent, and ultimately triumphant, country. Thatcherism spoke in Churchillian terms, but she did so while remaking 1940 in her own image, thereby creating her own national story and redefining a key moment in Britain's history in a way that Labour were poorly placed to respond to.

This view of Churchill is now being mobilised to invoke a radical Toryism, domestically and internationally, that is far removed from the man. He has been recruited as a figure who would have supported marginal and fringe views about dramatically shrinking the state, ending social welfare supports, ripping up social rights and protections, and creating a deregulated nirvana for cut-throat anti-social capitalism. The battle for a different kind of Churchill in the Tory Party seems lost for the near future, underlining the apparent hopelessness of any battle for a different kind of modern Tory Party.

All of these factors are being played out in the ongoing debate around the terms on which the UK leaves the European Union in 2019: a conflict which will continue long after the UK formally leaves. This debate has, after all, become an existential one, about the 'idea' of Britain and what kind of society the country becomes in the future. A key figure in this is the ex-UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, who clearly sees himself in Churchillian terms and as the natural inheritor of his mantle of leadership and greatness.

It is not an accident that Johnson wrote a few years ago a biography of Churchill, establishing a direct connection between the two and putting himself into the great man's shoes.<sup>9</sup> Johnson's Churchill, not surprisingly, is a caricature, with little nuance or ambiguity. In his account, Churchill is responsible not only for saving the world but also inventing it and bringing it into being. In Johnson's view, Churchill 'saved our civilisation', invented the RAF and the tanks, coined the terms 'Middle East' and 'Iron Curtain'; damningly, Johnson is also sure that the Germans actually succeeded in capturing Stalingrad - a result which might have led to a different outcome to the Second World War.

Perhaps most tellingly, Johnson believes that the calling of leadership, the possession of class confidence, and the belief in your own effortless superiority to others together constitute a Churchillian template which runs between the two men, endowing each of them with the ability to champion national renewal in times of doubt and uncertainty. Churchill could be seen, in Johnson's words, as 'a spoilt, bullying, double-crossing, self-centred bore, and a bit of an all-round brute', but he

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did have other human qualities, which Johnson celebrates.

Both men enjoy the good life and believe in the power of the word: while Johnson has not shown any great capacity at Churchillian spellbinding oratory, he has shown a sort of anti-gift for the printed word. And neither man is a natural organisational type, adopting instead an impulsive, devil-may-care attitude, often driven by the big picture more than detail. But it is here that any real comparison stops, for Churchill the wartime leader in World War Two was well aware of his many inadequacies, listened to colleagues, and ran a collective government in numerous areas, including the domestic front.

Johnson writes of Churchill's defiance against the odds in 1940 that if he had not succeeded, and the Nazis had achieved their aims: 'There would have been no liberation of the continent. This country would not have been a haven of resistance, but a gloomy client state of an infernal Nazi EU'. These words, linking as they do the Nazi dictatorship and the overly bureaucratic, rules-based EU, are jarring: such sloppy comparisons are now commonplace in frothy, easily excitable right-wing circles, but it is shocking to see them in what is meant to be a serious book. For Johnson and his acolytes, Europe is always beastly, domineering, and out to get dear old Blighty - whether by military means or via executive orders and procedures.

Boris Johnson, famously, became a Brexiteer only when he made the judgment about what would most help his political ambitions, a motivation as far from the Churchill myth as is possible. But underlying his interest in the man is his desire for mobilising people, and aspiration to tell a set of national stories in which people believe and see themselves. And this is where they run into major problems which no amount of wordplay can overcome.

Churchill invoked a particular idea of Britain, as a place of purpose, moral certainty and national calling. This notion sits within the rich tradition that Andrew Gamble described as 'the conservative nation'.<sup>10</sup> This is a place - mostly England, but where England is used synonymously for Britain - of landscape, countryside and other evocative and nostalgic images: all are used to legitimise an ideology centred on power, privilege and entitlement. And this kind of perspective managed to maintain itself throughout the twentieth century, through good times and bad, under Labour and Liberal governments; it did so partly because its rationale extended out beyond the Tory Party into circles that included progressives. It has been an enduring credo of the English-British ruling classes - from commerce to religion, to

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private education and the House of Lords - and it has contributed to shaping and blunting Liberal and Labour radicalism down through the ages.

The appeal and strength of the 'conservative nation' can be seen in the politics of Benjamin Disraeli, Stanley Baldwin, Harold Macmillan, and countless other Tory leaders. Yet, by the time of Thatcher, its always-present partisanship, divisiveness, and deployment as a cultural weapon against 'the Labour nation', began to sow the seeds of its own undermining. Forty years on from the onset of Thatcherism, and a decade after the banking crash, the normative assumptions of British politics are now under strain and question.

Underneath the public crises of the Conservative Party sits a longer-term set of issues: what constituencies and social forces is it giving voice to and representing? what sort of Britain is it championing? The doubt and uncertainty which flow from any potential contemporary answer spring from the decay and decline of 'the conservative nation'. This has left the Tory Party unsure of its moorings, anchorage and direction. It can no longer get away with the English-British conceit: it long ago lost Scotland, and, more importantly, has not had an uplifting narrative about the union of the United Kingdom for quite some time.

Scotland's independence referendum and the Brexit vote both provided seismic shocks to the British body politic, and neither British Conservatism nor the Labour Party has been able to comprehend and incorporate these events into their politics. Feeding into these territorial crises has been an even more powerful unravelling of the economic and social fabric which holds society together. The post-war settlement has been deliberately dismantled, but the subsequent Thatcherite-Blairite consensus has failed to deliver in terms of prosperity, security and social mobility. The cumulative effect of this hollowing out has left the Conservatives bereft of the underpinning of 'the conservative nation', while Labour is in a similarly vulnerable state: none of which augurs well for either party's ability to deal with the turbulent storms ahead.

In such an environment it is much easier to try to find your answers in an imagined, simplistic version of the past: one where the forces of good won out and everything was in black and white, including the political choices. Boris Johnson wrote that: 'The Tories are jealous of their relation with Churchill. It is a question of badging, of political ownership'. Unusually for Johnson, this is a profound understatement.

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Not all judgements of Churchill are laudatory. According to John Charmley, Churchill's record as a party leader was 'on balance, one of failure', and being party leader was not 'a role he relished', or 'one upon which he spent much of his time'.<sup>11</sup> His record in elections is also one of the poorest of any Tory leader: he lost two and won one, but in terms of the popular vote he lost all three. And yet, with all these qualifications and many others, Roy Jenkins could make the claim in his biography, that 'Churchill, with all his idiosyncrasies, his indulgences, his occasional childishness, but also his genius, his tenacity and his persistent ability ... [was] ... the greatest human being ever to occupy 10 Downing Street'.<sup>12</sup>

Churchill's appeal today is that he can be invoked to represent a lost England, or more accurately, England-Britain: a land, as he saw it, of England as 'a world island', at peace domestically and connected internationally to Europe, the Empire/Commonwealth and the Anglosphere of English-speaking democracies. But the continued harking back to this lost world is symptomatic of a country trapped in the past, which has seemingly given up on creating a collective future. This is evident everywhere around us: from the obsession with costume dramas such as *Downton Abbey*, to the allure of *The King's Speech* and *The Crown*: all of which are versions of Britain which play well internationally and particularly in American markets. Such cultural creations speak of a familiar 'them' and 'us', where the lower orders knew their place and the ruling elites acted with certainty and self-belief (and the Windrush generation had yet to leave the colonies). For many people today, this seems inviting and positive (leaving aside the voyeurism).

All around Britain the past seems to be alive, noisy and influential, while the future has been infinitely postponed. This has enormous political consequences, because - notwithstanding Corbyn and Labour's appeal to certain demographics - a party of the centre-left cannot be based on promising a better yesterday: whether it be pre-Blair, pre-1945 or scrolls as far back as Keir Hardie. Labour has always had a conservation element to it - it has been rightly suspicious of the claims of economic determinism, capitalism and bosses that they are the future, that they are the true agents of change. But when it has been most successful it has also had a story to tell about the future.

Something deeper is underway in present society. One dimension is the collapse of Western modernity as a liberating force for progress. This has had a massive effect on the social-democratic parties of the wealthy parts of the world: not one of

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these parties is in a healthy place electorally; not one of them is making or remaking the political and intellectual landscape of their country. And one relatively decent election result from Corbyn's Labour in 2017 is not proof of bucking that trend, while Labour's subsequent failure to build on that breakthrough speaks volumes.

It is not surprising, in this climate, that Churchill seems alive and ever-present, or that Attlee and Hardie are invoked in Labour circles. But the answers we need now and for the future are not to be found in the past. To search for a politics based on past heroes only serves to throw a light on the depth of crisis we are in, and a massive failure of political imagination.

The Churchill industry and its reach poses serious questions for the left and progressives. It demands a set of thoughtful responses on big questions: what is the state of Britain? where are the hopeful, uplifting, stories of Britain? is Britishness salvageable as a set of identities for progressives, or is it forever associated with the right and reactionaryism?

A major challenge for the left in answering these questions is that many do not see them as important, and would instead be happier spending their time on painting the Tories as pantomime villains, or invoking the abstracts of austerity and inequality. These are all fine as far as they go in mobilising your own tribe, but they don't play that well beyond this - as all the polling evidence of the last three years shows.

The question of Britain - the 'idea' of Britain, different interpretations of Britishness - has been one that Labour and most of the left have been prepared to leave to the right. The exceptions have been few: Gordon Brown's mood-music missives on a Britishness of shared values, which ultimately went nowhere, and had little relationship to his own statecraft; or the writings of George Orwell, which were much more thoughtful, but also very much of their time.

This is not the place or space to address this question more fully, but it is important to register that the demise of both 'the conservative nation' and 'the Labour nation' is opening up the political terrain and landscape in ways which cannot as yet be fully predicted.<sup>13</sup> The anchor points of the Conservative and Labour coalitions no longer make the sense that they used to; and nor do their visions of society, or of Britain. All over the Western world, similar stories of the dislocation and disruption of centre-left and centre-right are being told, yet too many still

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think that Britain could somehow be immune from this, and that its own unique transformations have not played a part in bringing this about.

Long after these current predicaments have been resolved, when the nations of the UK have left the EU, and the UK itself has been reconfigured, Winston Churchill will still be remembered for the part of his public life that really mattered, and that echoes down through the ages. It may be a caricatured, truncated Churchill, mostly missing all his sins and mistakes, but the man does matter - for he did, when it was most needed, provide leadership. But we also need to recognise that neither Churchill nor the Labour search for answers in the past can provide us with much in the way of guidance or moral compasses for the future.

We are now unambiguously living in an old country, a society that has repeatedly failed at critical moments to embrace a democratic, modern, European future. We are still caught in the shadow of Churchill's mythology, as well as the deployment of 1940 in the service of Thatcherism. Radicals today and of the near-future should have no illusions of the herculean task they are taking on in trying to rebuild a new sense of the nation, in Britain and elsewhere. But at least we have the knowledge that this is an age of disruption and shock waves.

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## Notes

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2. John Bew, *Citizen Clem: A Biography of Attlee*, riverrun 2016.
3. Paul Mason, 'Churchill's genius was understanding how to keep working class radicalism in check', *Guardian*, 8.1.18.
4. Anthony Barnett, *Iron Britannia: Why Parliament waged its Falklands War*, Allison and Busby 1982.
5. Macmillan, 24.1.65, quoted in Martin Kettle, 'Fifty Years on, we've yet to find post-Churchill Britain', *Guardian*, 15.1.15.

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6. Richard Crossman, *Diaries of a Cabinet Minister: Volume One: 1964-66*, Jonathan Cape and Hamish Hamilton 1975, p143.
7. Roy Jenkins, *Churchill: A Biography*, Macmillan 2001, p911.
8. George Orwell, quoted in Robert Pilpel, 'Churchill and Orwell', *Finest Hour*, 142, Spring 2009.
9. Boris Johnson, *The Churchill Factor: How One Man Made History*, Hodder and Stoughton 2014.
10. Andrew Gamble, *The Conservative Nation*, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1974.
11. John Charmley, 'Winston Churchill', in Charles Clarke, Toby S. James, Tim Bale and Patrick Diamond (eds), *British Conservative Leaders*, Biteback Publishing 2015, pp237, 248.
12. *Churchill: A Biography*, op cit, p912.
13. But it is one which is the subject of in-depth study: see Gerry Hassan and Eric Shaw, *The People's Flag and the Union Jack: An Alternative History of Britain and the Labour Party*, Biteback Publishing, forthcoming 2019.