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Opening Extract from...

A Classless Society

Britain in the 1990s

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Intro
Nineties
'From despair to where'

Margaret Thatcher cast a long shadow. Her enforced departure from office in November 1990, deposed as prime minister by her own colleagues in the Parliamentary Conservative Party, was the biggest political earthquake that Westminster had experienced since the defeat of Winston Churchill in the election of 1945. The key difference, of course, was that Churchill had been removed by the will of the people in a vote that had been delayed due to hostilities; ten years and a world war had passed since the last time the British electorate had been consulted about the future of the nation. Thatcher's exit, on the other hand, came after a hat-trick of election victories, and was brought about by the actions of the 152 Tory MPs who cast their vote against her in a leadership challenge.

The consequences of that contest were to colour Conservative politics well into the next century, many in the party believing that there was still unfinished business, that the Thatcherite revolution had yet to be completed. More widely, though, the new decade was to find it hard to escape the influence and impact of her political philosophy. Even in her heyday, she had never carried the whole country with her, but so powerful and all-pervasive was her presence that she had become the dominant symbol of Britain, whether one supported or opposed her.

In particular she bequeathed the culture a single phrase that echoed through the 1990s. 'There's no such thing as society,' quoted a character in an episode of the television drama *Our Friends in the North*. 'Remember that?' Much of what was to come in the political and cultural developments of the following years was an attempt to overturn that perception, to insist that there was indeed such a thing as society.

The use of the line in *Our Friends in the North* was slightly anachronistic, since the episode in question was set in 1987, the year that Thatcher actually made the comment in an interview with the magazine *Woman's Own*, but the fact that it was still being cited in a television show screened nearly ten years on was tribute to its resonance. As normal with such quotes, it gained

something from being seen in its original context. 'There is no such thing as society,' Thatcher had said, in a passage about how looking after one's own was not the same as greed, and she went on to add: 'There is a living tapestry of men and women and people and the beauty of that tapestry and the quality of our lives will depend upon how much each of us is prepared to take responsibility for ourselves and each of us is prepared to turn around and help by our own efforts those who are unfortunate.'

That explanation of her moral faith in Christian charity, however, made less impact than the denial of society, largely because it failed to describe the Britain of popular perception. Many believed that the precise opposite held true, that Thatcherism had unlocked a spirit of greed and selfishness, had played to the baser instincts of humanity. The rhetoric about civic responsibility was not seen to be matched by practice and – however much it infuriated some on the right of the Conservative Party – there remained a widespread belief not only that society did exist, but that it was inextricably tied up with the actions of the state, and specifically with the welfare state.

Thatcher won an economic argument, but not the moral one. While few still thought, by the end of her term in office, that the state should have a role in owning and running car manufacturers or telecommunications companies, most continued to believe that provision for 'those who are unfortunate' should be made by the state, rather than by charity. In 1991 the British Social Attitudes Survey showed that 65 per cent of the population agreed with the statement that the government should 'increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social services'.

The fact that the electorate failed to extend that logic into the general election the following year by voting in sufficiently large numbers for the Labour Party – which was promising to put up taxes in order to raise money for precisely these causes – was a source of considerable discomfort in some quarters. There were those who attributed the gap between professed belief and practical expression to hypocrisy, others who saw the problem as being a lack of credibility on the part of the Labour leader, Neil Kinnock. But surprisingly few were prepared to give much credit to John Major, the successor to Thatcher, who had softened the harsher edges of her policies and, in the process, ushered in a new era for the country.

When, in 1990, Major set out his stall in a bid for the leadership of the Conservative Party, he promised to 'make changes that will produce across the whole of this country a genuinely classless society, in which people can rise to whatever level their own abilities and their own good fortune may take them from wherever they started'. Six and a half years later, in his last press conference as prime minister, he returned to the same theme, saying

that he wanted 'the chance to take forward my belief in a classless society, where more of the have-nots are able to join the haves'.

This was, in his mind at least, the defining philosophy of his premiership: the pursuit of an inclusive Britain that didn't leave large swathes of its population trapped in hopelessness and underachievement. 'I want to see us build a country that is at ease with itself,' he urged in his first speech as prime minister, 'a country that is confident and a country that is prepared and willing to make the changes necessary to provide a better quality of life for all our citizens.' In his memoirs, he went on to explain what he meant by a classless society: 'not a society without difference, but one without barriers.'

From another perspective, this wasn't classlessness at all, but rather a restatement – in warmer, more comforting tones – of the same meritocracy promised by Thatcher, and by previous prime ministers; a Britain in which social and financial background should be no bar to mobility, and where the power of vested interests should no longer hold sway. In 1994 a memo written by John Maples, deputy chairman of the Conservative Party, was leaked to the press, implicitly acknowledging the continuity, whilst also reporting on the failure to realise the objective thus far: 'Although in the 1980s the Conservatives seemed to promise a classless society of opportunity, the reality is now that the rich are getting richer on the backs of the rest, who are getting poorer.'

By that stage Major was already past the peak of his popularity, but in the first couple of years of his premiership, his message of a less ideologically driven Thatcherism chimed with the mood of the nation. As Thatcher left office, the country was entering a recession that was to last for nearly two years, longer even than the recession at the start of the 1980s, and there was a growing suspicion that Conservative assurances of economic rejuvenation had proved false. Worse, many felt that something valuable had been lost over the course of the Thatcher decade, as private profit took precedence over public service; that Britain was in danger of throwing away an intangible but powerful cohesion, something that might well be termed 'society'.

The Tories had become widely distrusted, perceived to be – in a phrase that would shortly gain currency – the 'nasty party', but it was Major's unique achievement at the beginning of the 1990s to distance himself in the public mind from this image. Aided by the fact that he was virtually unknown when he became prime minister, he benefited hugely from being not-Thatcher. And to a country that seemed somehow a colder place than it had once been, he offered the reassurance that a sense of community could be rebuilt, healing the divisions of the previous decade.

When his premiership was blown off course and fell into disrepute, Major was seen to have failed to deliver on that undertaking. By then the country was emerging from recession and commencing a period of uninterrupted growth that would last well into the new century, fuelled by growing productivity, an expansion of credit and – with manufacturing starting to move to the Far East – the falling cost of consumer goods. But Major was given little praise for that long boom, nor for the social progress that was made possible as a result of such increased prosperity. Instead the beneficiary would be Tony Blair, the future Labour leader.

In the later years of the long Conservative government, the dividing line in British politics was drawn very sharply between the Tories on one side and most of the rest of the country on the other. Blair, while seldom defining himself as a product of the Labour Party, and deliberately eschewing the tag of socialism, was very insistent on where he stood in terms of that fault line. 'I am not a Tory,' he would say repeatedly. Nonetheless, his achievement was to sell a repackaged version of Conservatism at a time when the brand seemed irredeemably tainted; he articulated Major's dream more convincingly than could Major himself.

It remained, however, the same dream, as Blair's most powerful colleague, and rival, Gordon Brown, was to make clear when talking about his wish to create 'a truly classless society to promote opportunity'. That echoing of language across the parties was one of the most striking features of the decade. Equally notable was the way in which Westminster politics was no longer in the vanguard. Britain changed substantially in the course of the 1990s, but very little of that change came from Westminster. Rather it was the product of cultural initiatives, from Cool Britannia and the new lads to television soaps and the internet. 'It's the people's will,' Jim Hacker had said in a 1981 episode of the comedy *Yes, Minister*. 'I am their leader. I must follow them.' That turned out to be a central part of the story of the 1990s. Politicians were no longer leading, but following, trying to catch up with the nation's aspirations and wishes. The growing obsession in political circles with focus groups, targeted marketing and private polling was a symptom of this development. Mistaking effect for cause, however, Tony Blair attributed the transformation of society to his own adoption of Tory policies in relation to the economy, defence and crime, concluding that it was only then that: 'The zeitgeist was free to turn less deferential, more liberal on social issues, less class-bound, more meritocratic.'

Blair was correct in his identification of the nation's mood, but ultimately it was neither his creation nor that of Major. Rather it was the outcome of

two political forces born in the 1960s that reached maturity in the 1980s: first, the anti-establishment tendencies embodied in Thatcherism, and second, the liberalising identity politics that were particularly associated with Ken Livingstone and what had once been known as the 'loony left'. Between them, they brought into being a new Britain, characterised by a tolerance for diversity and a democratisation in social and cultural – if not political – arenas.

The popular icons of the age were those who most convincingly conveyed the impression of normality, reaching a new level when the Manchester United footballer David Beckham married Victoria Adams of the Spice Girls; despite their extreme wealth, the couple's appeal was that they were so essentially ordinary. Blair's determination to play down his privileged background, especially when contrasted with Major's much more humble origins, was a recognition of that tendency, as was his habit of slipping a hint of the now ubiquitous Estuary English into his public-school accent.

It was noticeable too that Blair's inner circle seemed more inclined towards swearing than politicians had hitherto been. When John Major was overheard describing members of his own cabinet as 'bastards', there was a certain sense of shock, since it felt so out of kilter with his public persona; by the end of the decade, such language was par for the course in Downing Street. As, indeed, it was more widely. It became normal to see demonstrators against the government displaying placards that proclaimed the prime minister a 'wanker' or a 'cunt', while literature joined in the Gadarene rush towards profanity with ever more provocative marketing ploys. The novel *Martin and John* (1993) by the gay American writer Dale Peck was retitled for British publication as *Fucking Martin* and spent two months on the best-seller lists – it was hard to believe that it would have done so well under its original moniker. Similarly Mark Ravenhill's play *Shopping and Fucking* (1995) started in the artistic ghetto of the Royal Court Upstairs in London, but went on to enjoy a national and then international tour, its success helped greatly by the attention-grabbing title.

The decade started with no consensus about the identity of the nation, and politicians and commentators expended much energy in trying to find common ground, starting from a position of fracture and confusion. In the immediate aftermath of the 1992 general election, the novelist Michael Dobbs, formerly an advertising executive and a political adviser, acknowledged that things hadn't gone as smoothly as they might for any of the parties. 'The campaign never really caught the mood of the voters,' he

admitted. 'But the trouble for the admen was that there was no real mood to catch.'

The search for an identity, for a shared set of values, was largely prompted by the supposed Thatcherite repudiation of society, but was made more acute by the growing influence of the European Union and by the looming inevitability of devolution within the United Kingdom. The political shape of the nation was being redefined, and with that came a need to redefine what constituted Britishness. Gradually a new consensus emerged, less homogenous than that of the post-war period, but discovering, slightly to its surprise, that homogeneity was not absolutely necessary for social cohesion; in modern Britain variety was tolerable, diversity was desirable. The task for politicians was to recognise that new mood, to develop a politics that could reflect it, in content as well as in appearance.

In terms of their own methods, it was a challenge that they singularly failed to meet. The experience of factionalism within Labour in the 1980s and the Conservatives in the 1990s prompted the leaderships of both parties to change their constitutions, accumulating more power at the centre, exerting control over MPs and the choice of parliamentary candidates, and trying to ensure that the correct line, whatever it might happen to be that week or that day, was parroted by all representatives. Dissent and debate was stifled, conformity enforced, and the numbers of those actually involved in decision-making reduced. Even being a member of a cabinet or shadow cabinet was no longer a guarantee of power, when compared to the influence of spin doctors and unelected officials. By the end of the decade, the coming stars on both sides – many of them still serving their time as political advisers, but destined to inherit their parties – managed to look and sound almost indistinguishable from one another, a monoculture that was increasingly remote from the rest of the population. The consequences included a sharp decline in the numbers of those choosing to use their vote in elections.

The same disinclination to participate was not evident elsewhere. The great buzzword of the second half of the 1990s was interactivity, whether in advertising, computer games, reality television or – the biggest, most unpredictable development of all – the internet. If politicians were unable to lead, it was also true that the public were less inclined to follow. Some commentators began to talk about the growing redundancy of representative democracy and the dawning of a new era of participatory democracy. Such developments were at this stage to be found only in cultural form, but then these were still very early days of what was still known as the information superhighway.

With the democratisation of culture came an atomisation of society and therefore, in reaction, a need for shared experience, a wish to be seen to be part of a recognisable community. As the Conservative heritage secretary Virginia Bottomley put it, when the plans for the Millennium Dome were first announced, 'people want the sense of congregation, of coming together'. In August 1996 Oasis played two gigs at Knebworth to a quarter of a million people; had everyone who applied for tickets been successful, it would have been a three-week residency. That was not simply a tribute to the populism of the group's music; it also expressed a deep desire to be present in a mass moment. The same phenomenon of seeking comfort in the anonymous democracy of the crowd could be seen everywhere, from the excited fever that greeted the arrival of the National Lottery, through the proliferation of replica football shirts and the rise of festival culture, to the very public enthusiasms for figures as diverse as Harry Potter, Tim Henman and Mr Blobby.

Most obviously there was the public grieving for Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1997, in the week leading up to her funeral. 'Never have I, and millions of others, felt such a sense of community,' remarked the journalist and critic Anthony Holden. 'It finally gave the lie to Mrs Thatcher's cold, hollow dictum that there was no such thing as society.' Even more extraordinarily, the same phenomenon was to be seen in the behaviour of the public the day after the funeral; no events had been arranged for that Sunday, there was nothing to do or to see, but still three million people found their way to the royal parks in London, seemingly responding to a deep-seated desire to be part of a collective.

That week, just four months after his entry into Downing Street, was the high point of Tony Blair's popularity, the moment when he transcended political allegiance and came close to embodying the spirit of the nation. Significantly, however, he showed no sign of knowing what to do with that position, having achieved it. There was no great transformation of Britain in the wake of Diana's death, largely because Blair had no real agenda for reform. He responded to the public, offering it a mirror, rather than becoming an architect of change. For all his talk of the future, he did as little to shape it as had Major.

Indeed, Diana herself could plausibly claim to have been more influential in creating a new country. Since the 1930s, the royal family, under the influence of Queen Elizabeth, wife of George VI, had established a façade of middle-class normality in opposition to the celebrity glamour of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. The appeal of that image was acknowledged by Edward VIII in his address to the nation on his abdication in 1936, saying of

his younger brother: 'He has one matchless blessing, enjoyed by so many of you and not bestowed on me – a happy home with his wife and children.' Diana found a way of bridging that gap; she was both more glamorous than Wallis Simpson and more in touch with the people than her mother-in-law's family. The Queen Mother, previously the most popular royal, had maintained her position by saying nothing at all in public, but Diana learnt early on how to use the media; treated like a film star, she responded by behaving like one, appealing directly to the public and claiming a democratic legitimacy as measured in column inches.

Yet it was a flawed glamour so that, despite being the daughter of the 8th Earl Spencer, she remained seemingly accessible, scarred by self-harming and eating disorders. Like Blair after her, the assumption of speaking for the people was achieved despite the accident of her birth, but unlike him, she used her authority to address issues that were unfashionable and sometimes unpopular; her charity work came with a distinctly un-royal element of campaigning on leprosy, AIDS, homelessness, domestic violence and landmines. (Noticeably excluded were animal charities, normally the first refuge of celebrities.)

The shift in the royal popularity stakes also reflected the passing of a generation. The Queen Mother's reputation rested ultimately on her public profile during the Second World War. That conflict remained central to Britain's self-image, but with fewer and fewer alive who actually remembered the time, the need arose for a new source of mythology. Thatcher was the last prime minister to have memories of the war, and her replacement by Major seemed to offer the possibility that the late 1950s might become a substitute, a time of relative stability and prosperity, of Harold Macmillan's reassurance that the country had 'never had it so good'. But that era was too indeterminate, too transitional, too colourless a period in the public perception to serve convincingly as a rallying point. Instead, as the recession came to an end, it was the 1960s that seized the nation's attention and Blair, eleven years old when the Beatles swept all before them in 1964, who was perfectly placed to claim this as his heritage.

Again the phenomenon was initially cultural, but it swiftly acquired a social and political dimension. For if Major's talk of society, however classless, could be seen as a repudiation of Thatcherism, this public embrace of the 1960s was even more so. In one of her last speeches as prime minister, Thatcher had talked of 'the waning fashions of the permissive 1960s', but she spoke too soon. Even at the height of her popularity, she had been unable to convince the nation of her perspective; a Gallup poll conducted

in 1986 found that 70 per cent of the population thought the 1960s were the best decade of the century, and much of the 1990s would see coming to fruition seeds that had been planted a quarter of a century earlier.

One issue in particular symbolised the change. The question of homosexuality had been chosen in the 1980s as the battleground on which the war against 1960s social liberalism was to be waged, but despite some temporary triumphs, that offensive proved unsuccessful. By the turn of the century, even the Conservative Party was ceding the ground, so that when, in 2001, the Labour MP Jane Griffiths introduced a Parliamentary Bill testing the waters for the concept of civil partnerships for lesbian and gay couples, only one MP spoke against the resolution: the Labour member Stuart Bell. Fifty Tories voted against, but none of them ventured to speak up in the debate and, more significantly, no member of the Conservative shadow cabinet entered the lobbies, a decision having been taken that it was too controversial a subject to address.

In this process of liberalising society, it was not always acknowledged that Britain was forging a distinct and unique identity as a nation. Despite much talk that British politics was following an American model, there was no replication of the culture wars that animated so much debate in the United States. The opposition to secular liberalism came not from politicians but from church leaders. In 1996 Cardinal Thomas Winning, the Catholic Archbishop of Glasgow, attacked Tony Blair's argument that abortion shouldn't be a matter for the criminal law, and suggested that his professed Christianity was therefore 'a sham'. Three years later, Winning again criticised Blair, this time over his position on the Act of Succession, leading the prime minister to denounce 'fucking prelates getting involved in politics and pretending it was nothing to do with politics'. Blair was quite clear about his own faith, as were John Major and the Liberal Democrat leader, Paddy Ashdown ('I pray every night,' noted the latter; 'I believe in a Christian God'), but he tended to follow the advice of his press officer. 'Never talk about God,' commented Alastair Campbell, adding that both he and Gordon Brown, the son of a minister, had agreed that 'God was a disaster area'. Without political expression, the voice of religion faded still further into the background noise of society.

Indeed, as the new millennium approached, it was abundantly clear that Christianity no longer had a serious role to play in the cultural and social life of the country, save as a suitable setting for sitcoms: *The Vicar of Dibley* and *Father Ted* were hugely popular. In 1992 Waddingtons announced that the character of Reverend Green was to be dropped from the game of *Cluedo*, on the grounds that having a clergyman involved was 'no longer

appropriate in the Nineties'; he was to be replaced by 'a contemporary City entrepreneur'. Public pressure, according to the company, forced a rethink and the traditional characters survived, but then *Cluedo* had long been a deeply nostalgic game, rooted in the English detective novels of the 1930s and '40s.

Much of popular culture, of course, continued to be informed by America, but even here there was an assertion of independence with the sounds of Britpop, trip-hop and jungle, and the discovery that British movies could be successful even when they weren't costume dramas. While the structure of politics increasingly came to resemble that of America, with two parties converging on the centre ground, there could be no doubt that social and cultural attitudes were somewhat different.

Nor was Britain always in tune with its neighbours on the Continent. The relationship with Europe was to be the most divisive and significant political issue of the decade. Many would-be constitutional reformers looked across the Channel for inspiration on how to modernise what were said to be the anachronistic, crumbling institutions of British public life, but, taking an opposite position, it was not only Conservative Eurosceptics who wished to preserve differences. It was possible, for example, to celebrate Britain's continuing, and thus far mostly successful, transition to a multiracial society without the serious political reaction evident in some European neighbours. In the 2001 general election, the leading far right group, the British National Party, received just 0.2 per cent on a historically low turnout, and was outpolled by three fringe organisations on the left: the Scottish Socialists, the Socialist Alliance and the Socialist Labour Party. In the French presidential election the following year, by contrast, Jean-Marie Le Pen of the National Front got a hundred times as many votes as the BNP had managed from a comparably sized electorate.

Nonetheless, Europe did exert some cultural influence, most apparent, perhaps, in food. On the one hand, there was the arrival of European supermarket chains – notably Lidl and Aldi – and on the other, a rise in the standard of British cuisine, and in the status of celebrity restaurants. Amongst the latter was Granita in Islington, North London, which in 1993 was named Best New Restaurant in the *Time Out* Eating and Drinking Awards.

Granita was a product of its time, a narrow, almost colourless space with concrete walls. Steel chairs gathered around square, uncovered tables made of unbleached pine set closely together. It was not necessarily a place to be seen but, on a good night, it was a place to observe some of the rich

and famous customers, who might range from the Conservative cabinet minister Peter Lilley to the *Monty Python* star Terry Jones.

Minimalist to a fault, it was, said journalist John Walsh, 'the most stripped-down eating-house I know'. The food was similarly typical of the day, a severely restricted selection of dishes that drew primarily on Italian cuisine, made a point of ingredients rather than of treatment, and fitted the newly health-conscious mood of fashionable London. 'The menu offers a range of food ideal for keeping the healthy ideologue under nine stone,' wrote Giles Coren in *The Times*, though his fellow restaurant critic, Jonathan Meades, was not overly impressed. 'The cooking is pleasant,' he noted, 'but well this side of exciting.' Nonetheless, booking was essential.

It was here, on the last day of May 1994, that Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, the two brightest young stars of the Labour Party, met for an early supper to finalise their response to the death of the party's leader, John Smith. The most important element of the agreement had already been settled: that Brown, the older, more senior and more experienced man would stand aside from the contest to find Smith's successor, and allow his friend and colleague to run as the candidate for their faction within the party. What else was agreed – whether a deal was done that would allow Brown to succeed to the leadership in due course, and would in the meantime give him not only the post of chancellor in a future Blair-led government, but also wide-ranging control over domestic policy – was to be the subject of dispute for years to come, provoking a protracted feud in Labour circles for that generation and the next. Probably the most famous dinner in modern British politics, it inspired books, articles and documentaries as well as, in Peter Morgan's *The Deal* (2003), a television drama with Michael Sheen and David Morrissey in the lead roles.

Brown and Blair ate at the back of the restaurant and, at the time, their presence attracted little interest. Instead the media's attention that evening was focused on a table at the front, where the paparazzi were flocking around the actress Susan Tully, formerly of *Grange Hill* and now starring as Michelle Fowler in *EastEnders*, in which role she had recently been shot and wounded by a psychotic veteran of the Falklands War. The overwrought storyline was characteristic of the increasingly melodramatic developments in modern soap operas, and was being used to introduce viewers to a regular third weekly episode of the show.

Like its predecessors – *Crisis? What Crisis?* and *Rejoice! Rejoice!* – this book addresses what happened in the front and at the back of Granita, exploring both the high politics and the low culture of the era, in the belief that the latter not only reflects but often pre-empts the former. It is also concerned

with the world beyond, with the very different realities that existed in the country, and that were even evident in the London Borough of Islington itself.

Because, despite its reputation as an enclave for the fashion-conscious left, Islington was a diverse place. Plenty of politicians lived there, and it was too a media haven, with residents including Charles Moore, Paul Dacre and Ian Jack, editors of the *Sunday Telegraph*, *Daily Mail* and *Independent on Sunday* respectively. But it was also riddled with inner-city poverty: 60 per cent of the borough's inhabitants lived in council housing, half didn't have a car, and a quarter were not working. When Tony Blair contributed his Granita-esque recipe to *The Islington Cookbook* in 1993 (fettuccine with sundried tomatoes and capers), he was culturally out of touch with many of his neighbours, let alone with the country at large. Which is perhaps why he claimed elsewhere that his favourite food was fish and chips – also said to be the staple diet of John Major.