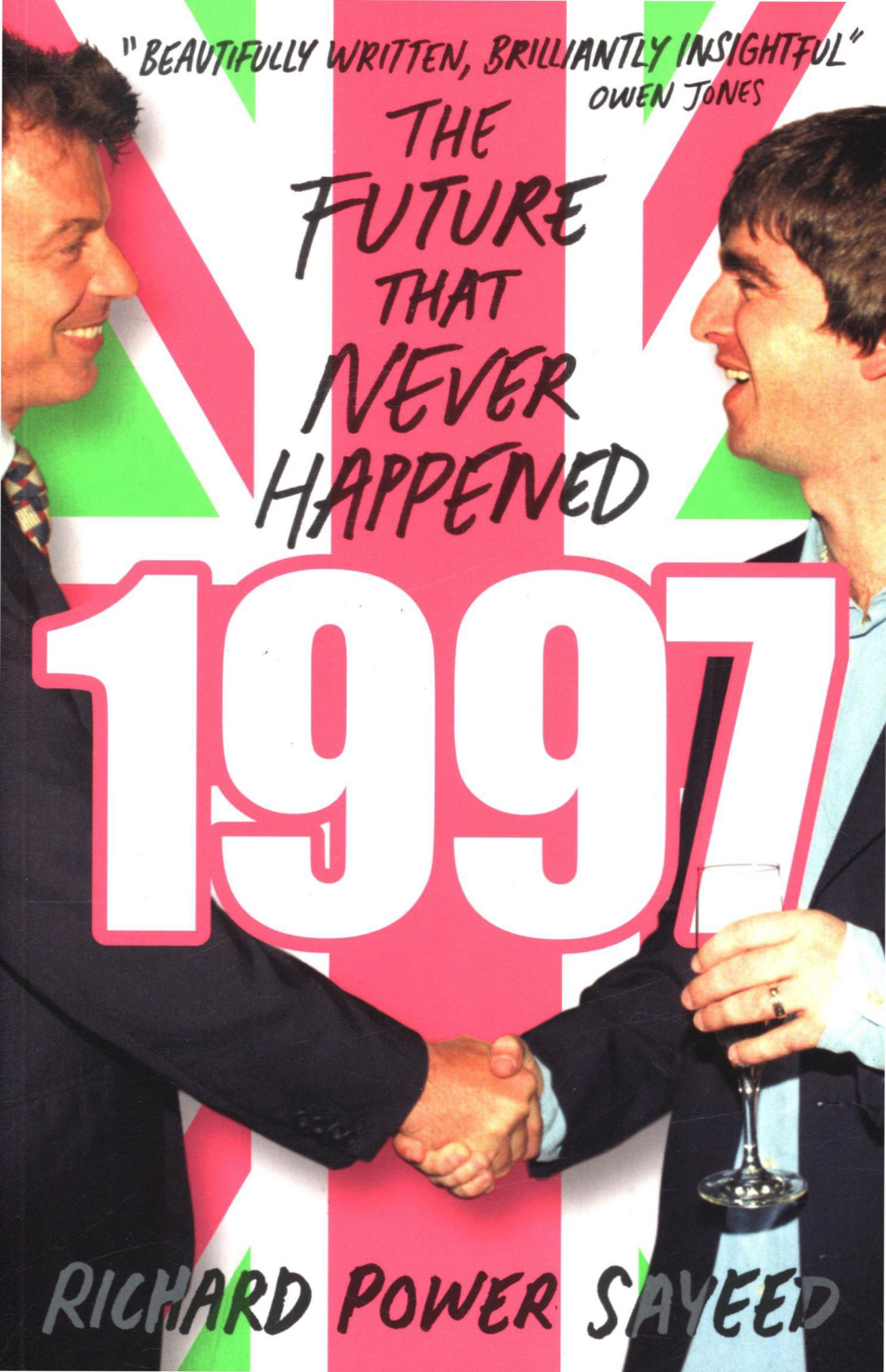
"BEAUTIFULLY WRITTEN, BRILLIANTLY INSIGHTFUL"
OWEN JONES
THE FUTURE THAT NEVER HAPPENED
1997
RICHARD POWER SAYEED

1997 – WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER?

Tony Blair and Noel Gallagher shaking hands at No. 10. Saatchi's YBAs setting the international art world aflame. Geri Halliwell in a Union Jack dress. A time of vibrancy and optimism: when the country was united by the hope of a better and brighter future. So why, twenty years on, did that future never happen?

Richard Power Sayeed takes a provocative look at this epochal year, arguing that the dark undercurrents of that time had a much more enduring legacy than the marketing gimmick of 'Cool Britannia'. He uncovers how the handling of the Stephen Lawrence inquiry ushered in a new type of racism. How the feminism-lite of 'Girl Power' made sexism stronger. And how the promises of New Labour left the country more fractured than ever.

'A beautifully written, brilliantly insightful account of New Labour's Britain – and fundamental to our understanding of how this country ended up in this mess.'

Owen Jones

'A dazzling, funny, and impressively detailed analysis of one of the most important years in modern British history. Both nostalgic and deeply critical, this book casts 1997 in an entirely new light.'

Ellie Mae O'Hagan

'A vital book that combines great storytelling with fresh insights, and says as much about the present as the recent past.'

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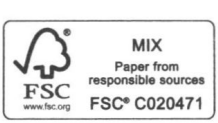

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ALWYN W. TURNER, AUTHOR OF
A CLASSLESS SOCIETY: BRITAIN IN THE 1990S

'Richard Power Sayeed has vividly reprised the year 1997, when radical currents flowed into the mainstream, and the authorities "welcomed moderate reforms with satisfied contentment." Such promise – but what did it deliver?'

ANDY MCSMITH, AUTHOR OF *NO SUCH THING AS SOCIETY: A HISTORY OF BRITAIN IN THE 1980S*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Power Sayeed is a writer and documentary maker based in London. This is his first book, and he has somehow managed to finish it without losing his love for the minutiae of nineties Britain.

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INTRODUCTION: YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION

Noel Gallagher was celebrating Labour's election victory with his girlfriend, Meg Matthews, at their home in the fashionable north London suburb of Primrose Hill. He would recall how, that night in May 1997, 'It was all champagne, brandy and cigars round our house ... Meg and me got pissed and went out into the garden and played *Revolution* dead loud.'[1]

The Beatles song that they chose had been written in the midst of worldwide protests and strikes, the 'events' of 1968. When many of John Lennon's generation had been sacrificing their safety and reputations in the hope of building a better world, this icon of 1960s pop counterculture had responded by singing 'you can count me out'. His lyrics had decried revolutionary 'destruction' and 'hate', but also dismissed changing 'the institution' or, indeed, 'the constitution'. His proposal was different and more focused on the self: 'You better free your mind instead'. As the Beatles track rang out from Matthews and Gallagher's hi fi, Lennon's words

mocking the utopian dreams of the sixty-eighters, Tony Blair was being driven from his parliamentary constituency in County Durham to London, where he would begin implementing a new kind of Labour politics, one that prized individual aspiration over class struggle.

On the other side of town, three intellectual luminaries of the British left were sitting on the sofa watching Blair's party triumph. Doreen Massey, Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques had spent much of the previous two decades describing and analysing the immense human cost of Thatcherism, Majorism, the new right – neoliberalism, they called it. They were, respectively, a feminist geographer brought up on a Manchester council estate, a cultural theorist who had come to the UK from Jamaica in 1951, and a senior journalist with a rather more comfortable background. They reflected the diverse, often fragmented, aims of the far left, which had long seemed powerless to halt the violent globalization of markets, the rich getting richer, and those with power acquiring even more of it.

Tonight, though, their enemies were being destroyed live on television. 'Portillo, Michael Denzil Xavier,' read the returning officer. A few of those who had assembled at Picketts Lock Leisure Centre, Enfield, laughed at the name of the right-wing defence secretary. Standing on stage behind the officer and in front of a high curtain of dramatic scarlet, he forced a smile. 'Conservative Party. Nineteen thousand, one hundred and thirty-seven.' There was polite applause. The result would be tight, but the prospect of Labour winning Enfield, stereotyped as a bastion of

working-class Thatcherism, was just too extraordinary. The result for the Christian Democrat candidate was read out. He had received 289 votes, and a solitary supporter at the back of the hall gave a huge cheer. Now the next candidate was up. 'Twigg, Steven. Labour Party ...' Standing beside Portillo, a young man with middle-parted hair and a red rose in his lapel looked nervous. '... Twenty thousand, fi—' The shouts and screams of celebration made the rest inaudible. It really was a landslide.

Massey, Hall and Jacques would have watched that night go by with mixed feelings. The 'new left' to which they belonged was a loose coalition of feminists, anti-racists, LGBT activists, environmentalists, anarchists and anti-capitalists that had been formed partly by the Paris 'events' and by the anti-Vietnam War movement – that is, by the revolutionary activism that Lennon's song had mocked. Members of this grouping argued that the class struggle embodied by the trade union movement should be only one component of a wider revolution for which they and their comrades should fight.

They had spent the Thatcher years building a power base in local government, while within Labour itself, they had aggressively fought the party's free market wing, of which Tony Blair and his right-hand man Gordon Brown were now the leading lights. However, Blair's 'New Labour' used the new left's insight that inequality and unfreedom were not determined only by class and wealth to bolster their own programme, one that aggressively downplayed the importance of economic inequality.

The following chapters describe a series of similar acts of appropriation, all of which happened in 1997, and through which those in power took advantage of subversion. These moments were junctures within histories that lasted much more than 365 days, but this book will show how New Labour's election triumph both reinforced the symbolism of the events of that year and increased their impact in concrete ways. New Labour acted as a fulcrum of progressive optimism, feeding into amorphous hope and drawing political capital from it. They gave practical assistance and ideological shape to the events taking place around them, from the mourning of Princess Diana to Noel Gallagher's political pronouncements. In turn, a liberal mass culture gave the party even more political space to expand the welfare state, to launch an enormously high-profile inquiry into police racism and to promote a multicultural image of the UK.

This book will tell how, in ways such as this, New Labour and Britain's culture industries took the ideas, slogans and sometimes the personnel of the new left, and of other radical projects, and they gave those concepts and people publicity and power.

As a result, there seemed to be signs of progress everywhere. The Spice Girls' 'girl power' filled the airwaves, the grassroots realism of Britpop was indie orthodoxy and the populist avant-garde of the Young British Artists was on newspapers' front pages. The Stephen Lawrence campaign forced a middle-class elite to listen to the anti-racist movement; Labour tried to construct a modern,

post-imperial union and it expanded social spending; and, after the shocking death of Princess Diana, the relationship between the monarch and her subjects seemed to modernize.

The UK seemed renewed, but it was becoming unstable. Pervasive misogyny, institutional racism, deep economic inequality, a culture that undermined and dispossessed marginal and radical groups – these were hardly dented by the spirit of 1997. The powerful individuals and groups that had made subversive ideas and people more visible used them either to enrich themselves or to advance their own, conservative agendas. That ploy, of powerful people exploiting radical messages, was by no means new, but it would define the year of New Labour's general election win, and its effects are still felt in the UK two decades later.

A credit crunch, a recession and austerity would follow from decisions made immediately before and after New Labour's general election triumph. Both this economic upheaval and the events of 1997 would then precipitate another series of crises for New Labour's legacy and for the faux-progressive culture it had promoted. Anti-migrant feeling has risen steeply, enabling the vote in favour of leaving the European Union. Jeremy Corbyn has moved ever closer to power, newly rejuvenated anti-racist and feminist movements have taken to the streets, and it has become increasingly likely that Scotland will eventually secede from the UK. This is the complex legacy of 1997.

At the Royal Festival Hall the Labour Party was celebrating. The semi-official soundtrack of the night boomed out of speakers hanging from the ceiling, and above

its heavy, pacing drumbeat drifted the infamous and slightly spaced-out vocals: 'Things can only get better'.

This song, playing over and over at the official celebrations, told of wide-eyed and instinctive hope. That was one side of the story of 1997, but the other was evoked by the Beatles track playing on Gallagher and Matthews's stereo, and particularly by its refrain, which casually dismissed the complaints of those who said that things needed to change.

'I had a ticket for the Labour Party party,' Noel would recall, 'but I had that much fun watching Portillo and the others done over I stayed home in front of the TV.' George Harrison and Paul McCartney's pining backing vocals strained through the still night air and floated over the garden walls of Primrose Hill. 'Don't you know it's gonna be ...' they called out, punctuated by the sound of Noel and Meg's neighbours banging on the walls, and by John Lennon's snarling response: '... Alright'.