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*The Changing
Anatomy of*

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The Changing Anatomy of Britain



Anthony Sampson

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The mistakes are my own, and I will be grateful to any readers who point them out, however angrily, so that they can be put right in subsequent printings.

Introduction

Change and Decay

Anatomy is Destiny.

Sigmund Freud

I don't think that whatever qualities we have as British people come from the blood or from race. They come from the historic continuity of our institutions, which themselves form our identity as long as we remember them.

Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper, 1975

'WHAT have you changed?' Margaret Thatcher was asked when she became prime minister, and replied: 'I have changed everything.' There was nothing new about the claim, which successive prime ministers had made over the past twenty years, each painting their own picture of the new Britain.

Harold Macmillan portrayed himself as stealthily navigating the retreat from empire, to make Britons face up to a new era of commercial adventure. 'It's exciting living on the edge of bankruptcy,' he said to me in 1961. 'People don't realise that the Victorian age was simply an interruption in Britain's history.' Harold Wilson depicted himself as harnessing the forces of the 'white-hot technological revolution' to British government: 'I think we produced in forty-eight hours the biggest revolution in Whitehall since Lloyd George,' he assured me in 1965. 'You've got to appeal to the Dunkirk spirit.' Edward Heath wanted above all to teach people to 'stand on their own feet': 'We have to get back to the traditional British attitude of independence from the state,' he told me in 1971. 'Already people's attitudes are beginning to change.'

Margaret Thatcher was even more emphatic about the need for individual responsibility: 'I've always regarded the Conservatives,' she told me in 1977, 'as the party of the individual.' She was more dogged and articulate than Heath, and she took over when Britain was much more disillusioned with trade unions and the welfare state, and when all Western countries were reacting against state bureaucracies. Her crusade to revive capitalist enterprise and to

reverse Britain's long decline was acclaimed not only by British Tories but by conservatives across the Western world.

For Britain, the first industrial nation, was the first to show many ominous signs of the running-down of an advanced capitalist society, and other countries were watching anxiously for their own symptoms of 'the English disease', including over-powerful unions and too-easy welfare. There was nothing new about Britain's industrial decline, and many historians traced it to the mid-nineteenth century, when Britain was already becoming technologically backward compared to Germany or the United States. Some blamed the economic forces which weakened Britain's competitive advantage; others blamed Britain's ruling class who retreated from industry and trade and failed to respond to the new challenges. Whatever the causes Britain's economic decline had become far more evident over the past twenty years, as Western Europe overtook her standard of living and Japan loomed as a more formidable competitor. But other countries were beginning to encounter some of Britain's difficulties, and they watched the British experiments all the more anxiously. Was Britain the forerunner of every late industrial state?

Britain has the extra interest of a country which has not only been the world's greatest industrial power with an empire across five continents, but which has maintained ancient institutions which in the past have survived and adapted to new challenges and threats. The problem of achieving change through conservative institutions has confronted successive prime ministers. 'It is a very difficult country to move, Mr Hyndman,' Disraeli, just before he died in 1881, warned the socialist leader, 'a very difficult country indeed, and one in which there is more disappointment to be looked for than success.'¹ In the following century Britain's entrenched institutions and countervailing powers have put up higher obstacles against any government which wants to change their direction, whatever their mandate from the electors. 'I want Number Ten to be a powerhouse, not a monastery,' Harold Wilson told me (like many others) in 1964. 'This place is like a tremendous organ,' he went on, 'anything you play comes out at the other end.' But was the power-house plugged in to the grid? What happened to the organ-music? Each reforming prime minister was confronted with the limitations of his power as the bureaucracies, unions, and autonomous institutions closed their ranks against innovation. 'Power? It's like a dead sea fruit,' said Harold Macmillan. 'When you achieve it, there's nothing there.'

It is still early to assess how far Margaret Thatcher has succeeded in changing Britain's direction or attitudes, as she vowed to do. But

¹ As Disraeli's conservative biographer remarks, 'it does not follow that Disraeli wanted to move it'. (Robert Blake: *Disraeli*, Eyre and Spottiswood, 1966, p. 764.)

certainly her resolute policies at a time of world recession have shed a harsh light on British institutions and their leaders, compelling them to justify themselves. Overconfident trade unionists or paternal company chairmen, index-linked civil servants or embattled local councillors—none of them has looked as secure in the age of the Iron Lady. She has insisted that the Falklands expedition, which proved her own firmness, has marked a turning-point in Britain's self-confidence.

In this book I look back on the twenty years since I wrote the first *Anatomy of Britain*, during which both parties made bold promises of change and reform, and try to reflect what happened to the promises, and why. As in my previous *Anatomies* I try to conduct the reader through the institutional labyrinth, and to show Britain's workings not so much in terms of mechanical levers, as of people and attitudes. I have tried to avoid forcing my subjects into any preconceived pattern or theory, and to let them speak for themselves about their attitudes, motives and drive. But in this tour I give more attention to the special characteristics of British institutions, their self-deceptions and resistance to change, the loyalties to tribal groups and the reassertion of old patterns of behaviour. I take note of Murphy's law ('if something can go wrong it will go wrong'), to Howard's law ('every change achieves the opposite of what was intended') to Monnet's law ('it is more useful to *do* something than to *be* someone'), to Russell's law ('resistance to new ideas increases as the square of their importance').

It is a deliberately personal and informal tour of a single country, but it has an epic theme which is more universal. Throughout these twenty years the more serious politicians have realised the unique dangers of a nation in the aftermath of empire: they had to steer it from the wider seas of world domination into the narrower waters of national competition and co-operation with neighbours. They knew the parallels with other post-imperial nations from Egypt to Spain, though they kept their real fears private. When I asked Iain Macleod in 1961 what would happen to Britain if she did not enter Europe, he only replied when the tape recorder stopped: then said, 'No question—we'll just be like Portugal.'

But the problems of retreat and adjustment now also face other nations including the United States, while Britain's industrial predicament looks less unique as younger industrial countries in East Asia with their extreme flexibility and drive are challenging all Western nations. The tensions between old and new institutions, between national traditions and international competition, between conservation and development are now evident in all Western countries, while Britain has some advantages which others envy—above all a

tradition of political stability which looks more precious to countries afflicted by terrorism.

Journalism has changed over twenty years along with other institutions, and a succession of books, articles and reports have offered their own dissections and investigations into the state of the nation. Some obscure regions, including industrial corporations, the Treasury and even the Bank of England, have been opened up to let in a few chinks of light. Chairmen of corporations, who two decades ago were wary of any journalist, are now well accustomed to the arts of being interviewed. Diaries and memoirs by ex-cabinet ministers which used to be rarities are now commonplace, and the four volumes of Richard Crossman's diaries provide an invaluable source-book for anyone interested in the workings of political power. Sociologists and political scientists have given their own analyses of the machinery of government. But there is still scope I believe for a journalist to add flesh and blood to these pictures, and to try to convey the atmospheres, pressures and tensions which cannot be measured but which help to explain the operations of power. And it may be easier for an outsider to trace the connections and relationships between the circles of power, and to put them in a larger context.

In the meantime my own perspective and techniques, like those of others, have changed. Watching top people come and go, making their large claims while concealing many of their real problems, I have become more sceptical about interviews, and more interested in the historical perspective and the repetitions of old patterns. Having travelled widely over twenty years and having lived for a year in the United States, I have become more interested in the parallels with other countries and in Britain's interdependence with the rest of the world. This *Anatomy*, I hope, is presented in a larger context, of both time and place.

No doubt the author has himself changed in ways that he cannot judge himself. Twenty years older, it is doubtless harder to maintain indignation about mistakes in high places—or to take seriously men of power with whom one has been at school. The game of toppling father-figures loses some of its attractions in middle age, while the study of the more subtle corruptions of power becomes more interesting. No doubt I have developed my own deep prejudices as a self-employed individual confronting a world of intricate bureaucracies; but I hope this may qualify me to guide other outsiders through the institutional maze which is Britain.

This is a book about the people who are responsible for running the country and its institutions, not the other millions at the receiving end of their decisions. It is not therefore about

minorities, about the unemployed or about inner cities, which are subjects for books on their own. Nor is it concerned with Northern Ireland, except as it impinges on political and military problems; this is an Anatomy of Britain, not of the United Kingdom, and the power-structure of Ulster requires a separate expertise. Nor is it about the spiritual side of the British, or questions of private or social morality: I have not attempted to write about the Churches, which have influenced many other areas of power. It is not a book about how Britain *should* be, about new policies or possibilities; but about how it is—or at least how it looks to an individual journalist who remains curious about its unique and odd institutions.

London, July 1982

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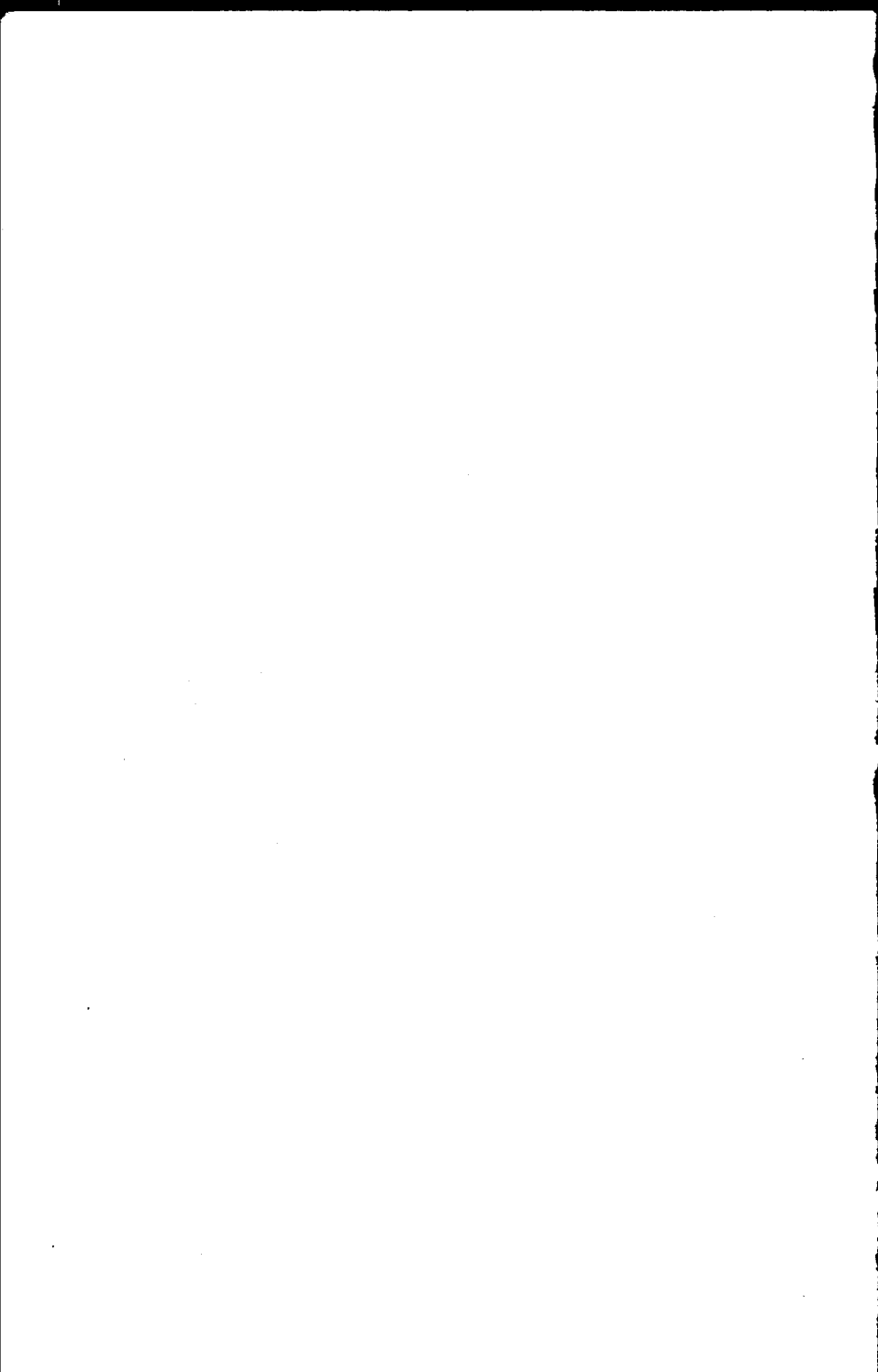
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PART

ONE

Politics



Monarchy: the Surviving Tribe

A *family* on the throne is an interesting idea also. It brings down the pride of sovereignty to the level of petty life. No feeling could seem more childish than the enthusiasm of the English at the marriage of the Prince of Wales. They treated as a great political event, what, looked at as a matter of pure business, was very small indeed. But no feeling could be more like common human nature as it is, and as it is likely to be.

Walter Bagehot: The English Constitution, 1867

It is still useful to start a tour of British institutions at Buckingham Palace. Not just because the monarchy is the oldest of them all, the central totem of a continuous tribal system which is Britain's most obvious distinction; or because the Queen is the formal head of many institutions which follow including parliament, the civil service, the Commonwealth, and the Guards. But also because the monarchy is not a bureaucracy or a hierarchy but a family whose values and attitudes are more personal and comprehensible than those of most other institutions.

It is a family that has become more expert than any other institution in one critical art—the art of survival. In spite of the magic and sentimentality that surrounds it, the family has to be more realistic and less fooled by its mystique than its admirers; the view from the palace is like looking at Britain from backstage, where sets, floodlights and props are seen as part of the illusion. While most other monarchies have been toppled or cut down, the British royal family have developed skills which have enabled them so far to survive each new republican threat. And the more Britain worries about her own survival and future, and the more her other institutions become discredited, the more interesting and reassuring is the continuity of the institution that pre-dates them all.

THE QUEEN

Queen Elizabeth's thirty-year reign itself provides a useful yardstick to measure Britain's progress in the post-imperial age. Her accession in 1952 coincided with the full flood of Britain's decolonisation: and the rituals of kingship, anthropologists remind us, have much to do with the ordering of time. Her three decades have been marked not only by the disappearance of the rest of the empire, but by some of the most rapid social changes in the island's history, including the doubling of the standard of living, the proliferation of cars, television sets and home gadgets, the transformation of city centres and the extension of air travel across the world.

In the midst of these upheavals the Queen's own life has remained almost uniquely unchanged. She still pursues her timeless progress between her palaces and country estates, surrounded by the rituals of nineteenth-century rural life, concerned with racehorses, forestry or corgis. She is still accompanied by friends from landed or military backgrounds, with a strong hereditary emphasis. The Mistress of the Robes is the Duchess of Grafton; the Ladies of the Bed Chamber are the Marchioness of Abergavenny and the Countess of Airlie. The Prince of Wales' private secretary is the son of the Queen's former private secretary, Lord Adeane, who was himself the grandson of King Edward VII's private secretary, Lord Stamfordham.

Behind this unchanging style the Queen is more concerned with contemporary Britain than might appear. She watches politics carefully and reads the boxes she is sent by her government. She is interested in industry, critical of British management, and impressed by Japanese methods. She knows more about world affairs than most diplomats who visit her, and she has complained to her Foreign Office about its elementary briefings. She has brought some newcomers into the palace, including her private secretary, Sir Philip Moore, who once worked for Denis Healey, and her press secretary, Michael Shea, a Scottish ex-diplomat who writes thrillers. She is not formally well-educated, but she has the best sources of information and her remarks can be sharp. As one American diplomat described her: 'I've learnt a lot from her. She's what we'd call—if you'll excuse the expression—"street smart".'

Her husband Prince Philip enjoys criticising the complacency and self-inflicted wounds of the British, the wrecking of the environment, the narrowness of education and the rheumatism, as he describes it, that afflicts Britain's anatomy. He particularly likes to champion the cause of the individual against bureaucracy and potential totalitarianism. As he said in 1981: 'Once a determined government begins the process of eroding human rights and liberties—always

with the very best possible intentions—it is very difficult for individuals or for individual groups to stand against it.’

But the life-style of the Queen and Prince Philip still does not have much connection with the urban, industrial lives of most of their subjects; and from time to time Prince Philip drops a brick which suggests that he does not begin to comprehend the gulf that separates him from other working (or non-working) men. ‘A few years ago everybody was saying we must have much more leisure,’ he said in June 1981. ‘Now that everybody has got so much leisure—it may be involuntary, but they have got it—they are complaining they are unemployed. People don’t seem to be able to make up their minds what they want, do they?’

While the Queen’s life-style and social surroundings have come in for periodic ridicule and political attack, the institution of monarchy has been almost unscathed, and has even increased its prestige as her reign continued. For it was one of the few British institutions whose reputation was not battered by the humiliations of economic decline, the retreat from empire, and the divisions within the nation. While trade unions, universities, civil servants, industrialists or politicians came under heavy fire for their incompetence or irrelevance the monarchy—which might appear the most irrelevant of all—was the most obviously popular and (in its own terms) the most efficient. The British car industry collapsed, corporations went bankrupt and public services went on strike, but the Palace still worked like clockwork. Royal patronage—whether of the royal parks, crown estates, royal colleges or the Royal Opera House—still provided some guarantee of standards. Royal visits still ensured a measure of discipline, so that an architect who wanted to get his building finished on time would try to arrange for a royal to open it. The immaculate timing of the great royal events—whether the trooping of the colour, Lord Mountbatten’s funeral, or a royal wedding—reminded the British that they could still do some things better than anyone else. While foreigners mocked Britain’s declining standards and industry they conceded that they could not compete with British ceremonial. As the *Boston Globe* put it after the royal wedding: ‘The Royal Family of England pulls off ceremonies the way the army of Israel pulls off commando raids.’

As British governments came and went, promising their opposite cures and institutional upheavals, so the continuity of the Queen, who has seen seven prime ministers come and go, became more reassuring. The Queen showed herself able to come to terms with each new lurch of the political system. When Harold Wilson came to power in 1964 the palace was apprehensive about the Labour

revolutionaries, and some ministers even refused to wear formal dress for court occasions. But the Queen was soon having friendly talks every Tuesday with Wilson, who later paid tribute to her helpfulness and commonsense; and she later confided in James Callaghan whose company she particularly enjoyed. Michael Foot first kept himself carefully aloof, but can now charm the royal family with his literary talk. It was with recent Tories that the Queen had a stickier time—all the more since they were less interested than Labour in the Commonwealth. Ted Heath never established a rapport with his monarch; and the weekly meetings between the Queen and Mrs Thatcher—both of the same age—are dreaded by at least one of them. The relationship is the more difficult because their roles seem confused; the Queen's style is more matter-of-fact and domestic, while it is Mrs Thatcher (who is taller) who bears herself like a queen.

As foreign republics went through upheavals the institution of monarchy could still show some advantages. The Shah was a bad advertisement for kingship, but the new King of Spain suggested that monarchy could still give stability to a divided state. In Washington during the Watergate crisis, Richard Nixon could deploy all the panoply of the 'imperial presidency' to cast his spell over Congress and the media. In Paris, President Giscard could exploit the regal mystique of the Elysée, to the fury of his socialist enemies. But the English prime minister still has no grandeur to compare with the monarchy's; and it was this argument that had swayed many British radicals in its favour in the past. 'It is at any rate possible,' said George Orwell in 1944, 'that while this division of functions exists, a Hitler or a Stalin cannot come to power.' Or as Antony Jay expressed it in the film *The Royal Family*: 'The strength of the monarchy does not lie in the power it has, but in the power that it denies to others.'

And by a remarkable turnabout it was in the former empire, where the monarchy had been most associated with domination and oppression, that the Queen came to play a historic role which took full advantage of her continuity. Under the formula which Nehru and Mountbatten had devised for India she was accepted as 'Head of the Commonwealth' even after most of the new nations had become republics, which enabled her to be much more than a figurehead; and countries which had seen the royal family as instruments of hegemony began to recognise the Queen as a useful ally in their links with the West. While the British public and politicians were becoming bored or disillusioned with developing countries in the late seventies the Queen was becoming increasingly well-informed about them, taking great care with her briefings about