AUSTERITY, AFFLUENCE AND DISCONTENT: BRITAIN, 1951-1979

Part 2: "Never had it so good" - What factors contributed to the economic recovery in the 1950s and 1960s?

Source 1: A British family in the 1960s and the consumer items that could be found in their home

Introduction: Harold Macmillan "Never Had It So Good"

Source 2: Photograph of Harold Macmillan

Harold Macmillan, the Conservative Prime Minister from 1957 to 1963, made a speech to a small crowd of people at Bedford Town's football ground on 20 July 1957. The occasion was an event to mark twenty-five years continuous service of the Colonial Secretary Lennox-Boyd. It became famous because of a certain phrase that was used. The speech was reported in *The Times* newspaper on 22 July:

> Let us be frank about it: most of our people have *never had it so good*. Go around the country – go to the industrial towns, go to the farms – and you will see a state of prosperity such as we have never had in my lifetime, nor indeed ever in the history of this country.

The phrase "never had it so good" is often misquoted as "You've never had it so good," but the idea is a very simple one – life in the United Kingdom was better in the late 1950s than it had ever been because the country was more prosperous than it had ever been. Macmillan was much more cautious about the extent to which this was true than he has been given credit for, as he used the phrase "most of our people" in this context, to qualify his judgement.

This idea of "never had it so good" dominated the 1959 General Election. The Conservative election slogan was 'Life's better with the Conservatives' and they promoted the idea that the Conservatives were responsible for the new-found **affluence** of the British people in the late 1950s in which we "never had it so good".

What was the state of the British economy in the early 1950s?

Britain was still one of the richest countries in the world in 1951. By 1952 British **manufacturing** employed 40% of the workforce and was responsible for a quarter of the world's manufacturing exports. This was due to the government encouraging exports to help solve the country's financial difficulties. Many of Britain's European rivals were still recovering from the Second World War. As the war ended there was a boom in the global economy as countries turned from wartime production back to peacetime trade. There was a lot of money to be earned from overseas trade through exports and investments. There was rising demand at home now as rationing and austerity had ended, resulting in full employment. Britain was the leading world producer of ships and the leading European producer of coal, steel, cars and textiles. Electronics and engineering, oil refining and chemical production were all growing British industries. Most industrial products bought in Britain in the 1950s were made in Britain.

What were the main features of Britain's growing affluence in the 1950s and 1960s?

1) Wage rises and tax cuts

The early 1950s saw the end of rationing and austerity, and people began to feel more affluent. As well as the end of rationing a number of other elements helped to give people this feeling of affluence:

- A sustained increase in overseas trade after the war had given British businesses a huge financial boost
- A reduction in working hours in the 1950s led to more leisure time and greater spending on leisure activities.

By the end of the 1950s Britain had a higher income per head of population than anywhere else in the world except for the USA.

In 1951 men over 21 earned on average £8.30 a week. By 1961 this had increased to £15.35, and by 1971 it would be £30.93. Between 1955 and 1969 prices increased by 63%, while weekly earnings rose 130%, which meant that workers could afford to buy more with the money they earned. There was a rising demand for unskilled and semi-skilled workers which led to increasing employment for young people. Wages for teenagers were 50% higher in 1957 than in 1938.

Full employment meant that people could change jobs more easily and earn better salaries. This led to higher wages as employers competed to recruit the best candidates for their businesses. Public sympathy made the government give reasonable pay rises to teachers and nurses. Wages continued to rise throughout the 1960s.

Tax cuts meant that workers got to keep more of the money they earned. The Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer, R. A. Butler, cut **income tax** from its highest level of 47.5% to 45%

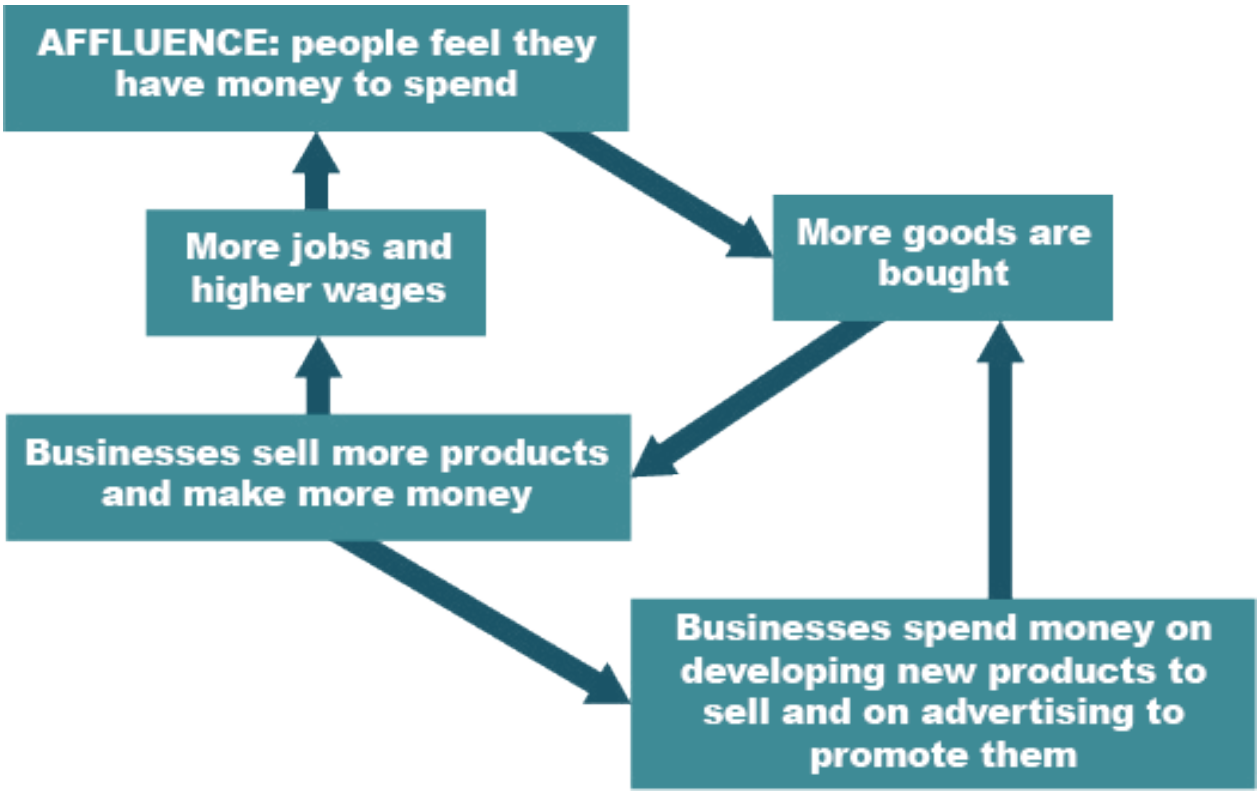
then down to 42.5% in 1955 in time for the general election, which the Conservatives won. **Purchase tax** was 100% of the value of consumer items like electric fires, cosmetics and cars in 1951 but was reduced down to 25% by 1963. Any cuts in taxes increased the amount of money that people had to spend.

Borrowing money became a very common way for people to pay for things that they would not normally be able to afford. It was called **hire purchase**. The government had made it easier to get credit from banks and companies when it relaxed hire purchase controls in 1954. Hire purchase (HP) was a sign of consumer confidence as it showed that people were certain that they would have the money to pay off their debts. At least one third of families in 1953 were buying on hire purchase agreements. By 1956 one half of televisions were bought on HP. By the end of the 1960s the first credit card had been introduced into Britain by Barclaycard to make access to credit even easier.

2) Consumerism

Spending money on non-essential or luxury items rather than on the essentials of life is known as consumerism. Consumer spending increased by 115% in the 1950s, and by 1965 necessities like food and clothing made up only 31% of spending. Rationing had come to an end, wages were rising and taxes were falling. Prices fell as exports and productivity increased, helped by technological production processes that reduced costs. People were spending more money because they felt more financially secure and better off than they had ever been before. They had more money to spend on goods, and a greater variety of goods from which to choose. As the demand for more consumer items grew, prices fell, allowing more people to buy these items. This was known as the consumer cycle.

Figure 1: The consumer cycle



Consumers now considered that goods such as televisions, refrigerators, music systems and cars were a basic requirement. Before the war these had been luxury items available only to the most privileged sections of society. Car ownership rose by 250% between 1951 and 1961, the number of televisions increased 32% just between 1957 and 1959. Government figures showed a sharp rise in expenditure on food, clothes, shoes, household goods and technological items such as televisions and record players. At the same time, there was a fall in spending on drinking, smoking and entertainment which had increased during the austerity years of the 1940s. In the thirteen years of Conservative rule (1951–64) consumer spending had doubled.

Table 2: Statistics showing growing consumer affluence

Year	Total number of private cars	TV licenses issued	Private houses built
1950	2,258,000	344,000	30,240
1955	3,526,000	4,504,000	116,093
1960	5,526,000	10,470,000	171,405

Table 3: Percentage of new household goods found in British homes 1955–1975

Household goods	1955	1975
Vacuum cleaner	51%	90%
Washing machine	18%	70%
Refrigerator	8%	85%
Freezer	0%	15%
Television	35%	96%
Telephone	19%	52%
Central heating	5%	47%

Consumerism changed the attitudes of many people towards their neighbours. ‘Keeping up with the Joneses’, or making sure that you had everything your neighbours had, came to influence how some people spent their money. Advertising encouraged people to do this and often made exaggerated claims about how owning certain consumer products would greatly improve your quality of life. For example, adverts in magazines like *Woman, Homes and Gardens* and the *Picture Post* regularly featured adverts aimed at selling the ‘modern kitchen’ to revolutionise women’s lifestyles. Four times as much was spent on advertising in 1960 as in 1947.

As advertising tried to win over consumers, the consumers themselves went in search of advice. The consumer magazine *Which?* was founded in 1957 and sold 300,000 copies a year, giving advice on the truth of advertisers’ claims and the best ‘value for money’ purchases. The Consumers Association had 470,000 members by 1967.

The rising number of houses, both publicly and privately owned, boosted consumer spending:

- Labour-saving devices, like Bendix and Hoover washing machines, dealt with domestic chores
- Entertainment items were popular, such as Pye and Ferguson televisions, Bush and Murphy transistor radios and Dansette record players
- Electrolux and Frigidaire refrigerators meant that daily shopping for fresh food was no longer necessary
- DIY ('Do It Yourself') products became more readily available, for example ICI's Dulux paint range started in 1953 and Black and Decker's first electric drill went on sale in 1954.

All of this was made possible by completing the electrification of Britain. From 1950 all new homes had to have standardised ring circuits and sockets and by 1960 electrification had reached even the remotest rural areas.

Consumerism even affected what and how British people ate. The end of rationing and the beginnings of consumerism also saw the rise of **convenience foods**:

- Frozen peas
- Colman's instant desserts
- Bird's Eye frozen chicken pie and fish fingers
- Batchelors' 'boil in the bag' curry
- The tea bag was invented by Tetley's in 1952
- Nescafé instant coffee doubled its sales after the war
- Bottled and canned fizzy drinks like Tizer, Vimto and Irn-Bru.

There was a corresponding increase in ways in which people could eat out. In summer 1953 the first Wimpy burger bar opened in Wimbledon and the Bernie Inn chain of restaurants opened in 1954. The first Moka Coffee bar had also opened in Soho in 1953.

Not everyone benefitted from consumerism as Harold Macmillan himself acknowledged when he said, "*Most of our people* have never had it so good". There were still people without jobs who struggled to survive on their payments from the Welfare State. Old age pensioners had seen the value of their pensions decrease as prices rose with **inflation**. Some people were just paid very low wages, or were discriminated against because of their gender or race and were not able to enjoy consumerism.

3) Shopping

Before the 1950s, food shopping had been done either by means of regular home deliveries (milkmen or grocer's vans), or by going to shop in local butchers, bakers and greengrocers. Often this shopping had to be done every day as it was difficult to keep perishable food for long without a refrigerator. Shops were very different to how they are now. They were small and usually very specialised in one particular product. Local shopkeepers often knew most of their customers by name. Customers did not pick items up themselves and take them to a till – they had to ask a shop assistant to get them what they needed from the shelves or a store room.

The 1950s saw the rise of self-service shops in which customers picked up the items they wanted to buy and took them to a till to pay. In 1947 there were only ten self-service shops in the whole of Britain. By 1956 there were 3,000, with 12,000 by 1962 and 24,000 in 1967. The self-service

system started with the Co-op in London in 1942 because of a wartime shortage of staff, and then spread to other shops like Tesco in St Albans in 1947. By 1952 half of Tesco stores were self-service.

The next step was the supermarket, a large store which sold a wide range of different products in large quantities. There is some debate about which was the first British supermarket. Sainsbury's converted a building in Croydon in 1950, while its first purpose-built supermarket opened in Eastbourne in 1952; Tesco converted a disused cinema in Maldon, Essex which opened in 1956. There were 367 supermarkets in 1960, but by 1967 there were 3,000. Supermarkets were efficient and convenient and stocked a variety of products and produce. Their displays were often very impressive and their produce kept fresh for longer in refrigerated cabinets. Rising car ownership meant that people were able to travel further to shop and carry more home with them. The government system for keeping prices comparable between shops (called 'Retail Price Maintenance') ended in 1964 and supermarkets were able to offer discounts that smaller shops could not match. By the end of the 1950s the daily local shop had been replaced by the weekly supermarket shop.

Source 3: A woman shopping in a 1950s 'self-service' shop

Shopping centres began to change. In the new towns they avoided the higgledy-piggledy layout of old shopping centres because they were starting from scratch. Stevenage was designed to have no traffic moving through its shopping centre at all, and was the first British town to achieve this. The same was often true of high streets in towns that had been heavily bombed in the war, such as Plymouth and Coventry. They had brand new shopping boulevards with large car parks and delivery bays which made them much more convenient and pleasant places to shop. The 1960s also saw the beginnings of new indoor shopping malls – the Bull Ring, Birmingham, in 1964; the Elephant and Castle, London, in 1965; the Arndale Centre, Leeds, in 1967 and Brent Cross Centre, London, in 1976.

What was the Labour Party's plan for the future of British prosperity?

Source 4: Photograph of Harold Wilson

Harold Wilson's '*White Heat of Technological Revolution*'[1]

In his speech at the Labour Party conference in Scarborough on 1 October 1963, Labour leader Harold Wilson said:

> The *scientific revolution* cannot become a reality unless we are prepared to make far-reaching changes in the economic and social attitudes which permeate our whole system of society. The Britain that is going to be forged in the *white heat of this revolution* will be no place for restrictive practices or for outdated methods on either side of industry…In the cabinet room and the boardroom alike, those charged with the control of our affairs must be ready to think and to speak in the language of our scientific age.

In the same way that Harold Macmillan was misquoted as saying "you've never had it so good", Harold Wilson was misquoted as saying "the white heat of technological revolution". Wilson's speech aimed to unite the Labour Party after years of internal arguments and divisions, and he was also hoping to persuade voters to elect a Labour government in 1964. He wanted:

- Labour to appear to be looking to a bright technological future, in contrast to the Conservatives who were portrayed as backward looking (they had just chosen the aristocrat Sir Alec Douglas-Hume as their leader to replace Harold Macmillan who had to resign because of ill health)
- To avoid arguments amongst Labour MPs about how much more industry should be nationalised or whether Britain should have nuclear weapons (by talking about something new, rather than going over older issues)
- To avoid awkward questions about how the promises he was making would be paid for (a 'menu without prices' as the Conservatives called it).

[1] An extract of the speech may be seen at http://goo.gl/blj5xh and a modern re-enactment read by an actor may be seen at the Guardian website http://goo.gl/zFiQjH

By the end of 1963, Harold Wilson had an 11-point lead in the opinion polls over the Conservative leader. Labour went on to win the 1964 general election with a small majority.

Wilson himself was not very scientific, and while he was Prime Minister he found it very difficult to follow technical briefings. To oversee the 'scientific revolution' Wilson created the Ministry of Technology in 1964. The first Minister of Technology was Frank Cousins who was a trades union man rather than a scientist. To modernise 'outdated' British working practices George Brown, Deputy Leader and Secretary of State for Economic Affairs succeeded in convincing industry, trade unions and the government to sign up to the National Plan to link workers' pay to improve the amount of work they did.

Government studies suggested that investment in science and technology would lead to economic growth. Science could be utilised to benefit consumers. New technologies became part of the competition for new products for consumers. For example, Unilever had four research establishments working on a range of products from synthetic fats to ice cream recipes and controlling foam in detergents. Other examples of scientific advances in consumer items:

- Refrigerators and washing machines were more efficient and smaller
- TVs became larger, and showed pictures in colour
- Ready-made furniture units and synthetic furnishings made buying and building furniture easier
- Pre-packaged food rose from one fifth of food bought in 1960 to one quarter of food bought in 1970; food technologists worked on crisps, easy spreading margarine, sliced bread, canned soft drinks, mass-produced yoghurts and breakfast cereals etc.
- Household cleaning products were developed – Fairy Liquid in 1960, J cloths, Pledge, aerosols, disinfectants
- Synthetic fabrics were developed for clothes – Nylon, Terylene, Dacron, Lycra, PVC
- Other developments – polythene to cover and preserve food; teflon-coated non-stick pans; ring-pull cans.

There were plenty of British scientific achievements to be proud of -

- Cavendish lab's work on nuclear physics in 1930s had led to nuclear weapons and nuclear power - the first nuclear power station in the world opened at Calder Hall, Cumbria, in 1956
- Polythene was invented by ICI in 1939 to insulate electrical wiring and quickly became most commonly used plastic in the world
- Chain and Florey had developed a method for industrial production of the antibiotic penicillin during the war that saved millions of lives a year around the world
- Frank Whittle had invented the jet engine in 1943, and using his designs British companies went on to develop military and civilian jet engine designs that were used around the world

- Modern computing using hard drive memory and transistors was developed at Manchester University after the war and was the basis for all computer technology until the silicon chip was invented in the 1970s - LEO (Lyons Electronic Office) computer began running a large company payroll in 1951.

There were other great scientific discoveries and achievements that would become increasingly important in the future -

- Bernard Lovell built the world's first large scale radio telescope at Jodrell Bank in the 1950s - it helped beam TV pictures of Neil Armstrong landing on the Moon in 1969 all around the world[2]
- Dorothy Hodgkin worked out the chemical structures of penicillin, insulin and vitamin B12
- In Cambridge in 1963 Crick and Watson discovered the structure of DNA, the building blocks of life which would lead to the modern science of genetics.

[2]Building Jodrell Bank clip http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p037ph2z

How did the government support and encourage Britain's growing prosperity?

1) Housing and town planning

By 1951 some 900,000 new houses had been built but many more were still needed. When Winston Churchill became Prime Minister again in 1951 he created the Ministry of Housing. Harold Macmillan was appointed as minister in the new Ministry and given the job of beating Labour's record and building 300,000 houses a year. This was made easier by:

- Encouraging local authorities to allow private contractors to build more houses
- Abolishing the tax on land development making it cheaper to build houses
- Increasing the amount the government paid towards each house being built from £22 to £35 per house in 1952
- Encouraging the provision of mortgages so people could borrow money more easily to buy houses
- Reducing the quality standards set by Labour for council houses.

Macmillan managed to produce 327,000 houses in 1953 and 354,000 in 1954. When criticised for spending so much government money on building houses, Macmillan said that decent housing made British workers more productive. This level of house-building was sustained for five years. Britain had built more houses in the post-war period than any other country in Europe. Improving housing was a very popular way for a government to spend money. There were many reasons for building these new housing estates. For example, towns like Winsford in Cheshire built new estates to accommodate overspill population from Liverpool and Manchester in the 1950s and 1960s.

New towns were designed around communities[4] – each housing estate would have its own community centre, local shops and pub as well as a primary school, and the town would have a pedestrian-friendly shopping centre as well as a secondary school. Money was also invested in building up industrial estates with businesses to provide work for the people who lived in the new town. Many of the new towns started by Labour in the 1940s were completed by the middle of the 1950s[5]. People who moved into these new towns saw huge benefits to living in their new houses – fitted kitchens, underfloor heating, proper bathrooms, bedrooms for each child rather than shared ones.

[4] 1942 "New Towns for Old Towns" film https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SxzYkmiDY2Q

[5] 1979 documentary on the building of new towns called "New Town, Home Town" can be seen at https://goo.gl/6rkbFD

Source 5: 1950s housing, one of the 'new towns'

According to Drew Middleton, an American journalist writing in 1957:

> [The new British worker] moved to a New Town or a housing estate from a slum or near-slum. He is living in what to him is comparative luxury: a living room, a clean, and by modern British standards, modern kitchen. There is a bedroom for the children and a modern bath and toilet. He can walk or cycle to work and, if the weather is fine, he comes home for lunch…It is a quiet life, but to our subject a satisfactory one.[6]

Sometimes residents had to battle with the new town corporations to have their houses exactly how they wanted them. Connie Reece remembered tangling with Stevenage corporation architect in 1950s over front doors "I said, 'Look, I'm very sorry, we don't want black and grey any more, we want to have coloured street doors' and he said, 'You can't have it, you've got to have what's on your docket'... After three days of not letting the painters around or opening the windows, we won and had nice white paint on our windows, and I had a blue door, the women next door had a red door, and the women next door had a yellow door'"[7]

New concrete high-rise developments, 'streets in the sky', like the Trellick Tower in London and Park Hill in Sheffield, began to be built in towns. These developments would eventually provide 440,000 more homes. In 1958 local councils were given a government subsidy for high-rise tower blocks that were built over five storeys high. These blocks were made from pre-fabricated pieces and were relatively cheap to build. They could accommodate large numbers of people without taking up a lot of land. The idea was to house people together in their existing communities. Tower blocks were better than the houses people had lived in previously, even though they would eventually become run down as lifts were vandalized and walls were covered in graffiti[8]. Ronan Point in East London even partly collapsed in 1968 due to a gas explosion.

[6] Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good* (London, 2005), page 8

[7] From page 364 of *The Five Giants* by Nicholas Timmins published by Harper Collins in 2001 ISBN9780007102648

[8] The Planners Dream Goes Wrong" by the Jam coversa lot of these issues can can be heard at https://goo.gl/80QpvH

Source 6: brutallist concrete tower blocks at the Barbican Estate in London, built in the 1960s[9]

Three-quarters of the houses built between 1945 and 1954 were **council housing** but more than half of the houses built between 1954 and 1963 were **owner-occupied**. In 1952 local councils were encouraged to grant more licences to private housebuilders to have the same number of private houses built as council houses. The tax on mortgages was abolished in 1963 to make it cheaper for people to buy their own homes. As people became more confident about their earnings, more people felt that they could take out a mortgage – building societies provided 326,125 new mortgages in 1960 alone. Home ownership rose from 27% to 50% of all houses between 1950 and 1970.

Some changes in housing policy were less popular. The 1957 Rent Act reduced government control on the level of rent that private landlords could charge. The new law removed 810,000 houses from government rent control and led to rent rises in a further 4.3 million houses. It was seen as allowing private landlords, like the notorious Peter Rachman, to exploit their tenants. Landlords argued that rent rises would help them to afford property repairs, even though there was nothing in this law to force them to do this.

For all of the effort put into town planning in the 1950s and 1960s many people thought that not enough had been done to solve the UK's housing crisis. A report from The Times newspaper in October 1969 said "Out of a total stock of 17,300,000 houses in England, Wales and Scotland, less than 10 million, according to government standards, are fit and have basic sanitary amenities. Of the remainder over 2 million are "unfit" and must be demolished, 2.5 million are "sub-standard" and not worth improving and, according to the Ministry of Housing, will also have to be demolished; a further 2.5 million are "sub-standard" and require improvements and repairs."[10]

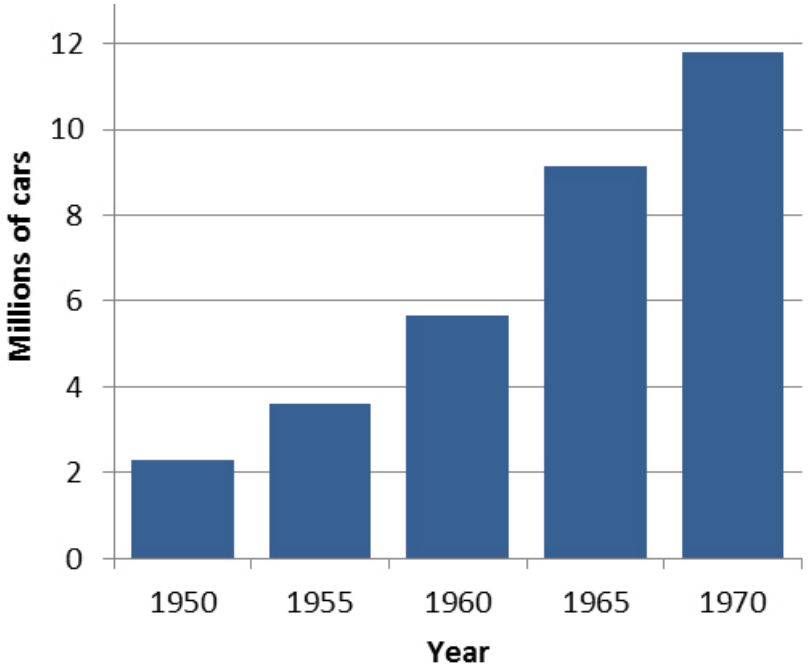
[9] Taken by the author

[10] From page 92 of *The End of Consensus* by Andrew Boxer published by Heinemann in 2009 ISBN 9780435312374

2) Investment in roads and motorways

The motor car became the ultimate symbol of Britain's growing affluence. There were a number of popular models – from 1945 there was the Hillman Minx family saloon, which cost £159; from 1948 there was the Morris Minor, which cost £100; from 1951 there was the Austin 7, which cost £125. They were all cheap to buy and to run and easy to fix. They were joined in 1959 by the BMC Mini which sold for £350. It was a cheap 'no frills' car with the added bonus that it was easy to park. Sales were boosted by celebrity endorsement from Lord Snowdon, the Queen's brother-in-law, Ringo Starr from the Beatles, and others. The Ford Consul and Zephyr were fashionable convertibles and the MG or the Austin Sprite were sporty alternatives. For the richer driver there was the 1961 E-type Jaguar which cost £2,200.

Car ownership and car use greatly increased between the early 1950s and the 1970s:



Source 7: Private Car Ownership 1950–1970[11]

This trend continued throughout the 1970s – 1.3 million cars were newly registered in 1971 alone. In 1960 some 28% of households owned a car, but by 1969 this figure had risen to 49%. In 1959 the car was the mode of transport for 39% of journeys, but by 1974 this figure had risen to 77%. The increase in car ownership led to an increase in road building – bypasses, ring roads, trunk roads and dual carriageways.

The 1949 Special Roads Act set up the regulations that would allow the building of motorways. It was a road design that had been inspired by the *autobahn* highway system of Nazi Germany, and the first plans had been drawn up as early as 1941. The basic design was to have several lanes travelling in opposite directions, with junctions and bridges that would allow the smooth and continuous movement of traffic at high speed.

[11] Information from Arthur Marwick, *British Society Since 1945* (London, 2003).

Source 8: The M1, near Luton, in 1959

In December 1958 Britain's first motorway opened – the eight-mile Preston bypass. It had two lanes on each side but its concrete surface suffered bad frost damage and was closed after 46 days. The first stretch of the M1, 67 miles from London to Leicester, opened in 1959.[12] It was built in 19 months, with three lanes on each side and the first motorway service station was soon opened at Watford Gap. From a slow beginning the pace in road building greatly increased. Between 1960 and 1963 parts of the M60 and the M6 were built. The A1(M) opened in 1961 and the M5 in 1962. Scotland's first motorway, the M8, opened in 1967. The Forth Road Bridge opened in Scotland in 1964 and the Severn Bridge opened in Wales in 1966. A total of 1,200 miles of new roads were built between 1957 and 1963. Building could be completed very quickly due to the availability of pre-cast concrete supports for embankments and bridges, many of which are still in use today.

This building of new roads (begun by the Conservative government in the 1950s) had a number of consequences:

- Houses were demolished and country-estates dug up by the planners to make their proposed road routes as straight as possible
- Town landscapes were changed as tunnels and flyovers were built to accommodate the increasing number of cars trying to get in and out of towns
- People could drive to new supermarkets and fill up the car with a week's shopping
- There was an increase in the number of people commuting to work in towns and cities from their homes in the suburbs and **dormitory villages**
- People could send their children to better schools further from where they lived if local schools were not good enough

[12] A contemporary colour documentary on building the M1 may be seen at http://goo.gl/TWHxMn A short documentary clip on the opening of the motorway may be seen at http://goo.gl/zcPSW9

- Charles Forte turned modest roadside cafes into huge hotel and catering businesses including the first motorway service stations – this was followed in 1971 by Little Chef and in 1978 by Happy Eater
- There was a rapid rise in caravanning – it accounted for 20% of holiday accommodation by 1970
- Car design changed and improved to make cars more comfortable and more fuel-efficient for longer journeys
- Roadside assistance organisations like the AA and the RAC grew to cope with increasing numbers of car breakdowns, sometimes caused by driving at speeds that cars were not designed for.

Wendy Reid, a student in early 1960, described riding down the M1 as follows:

> It was really strange. There were hardly any other cars, just this huge empty road...the surface was odd – it was concrete slabs and you sort of bumped along at the joins. I kept saying to my boyfriend "Go faster!" but he couldn't. The car just wasn't built for it – 65 miles an hour was its top speed.[13]

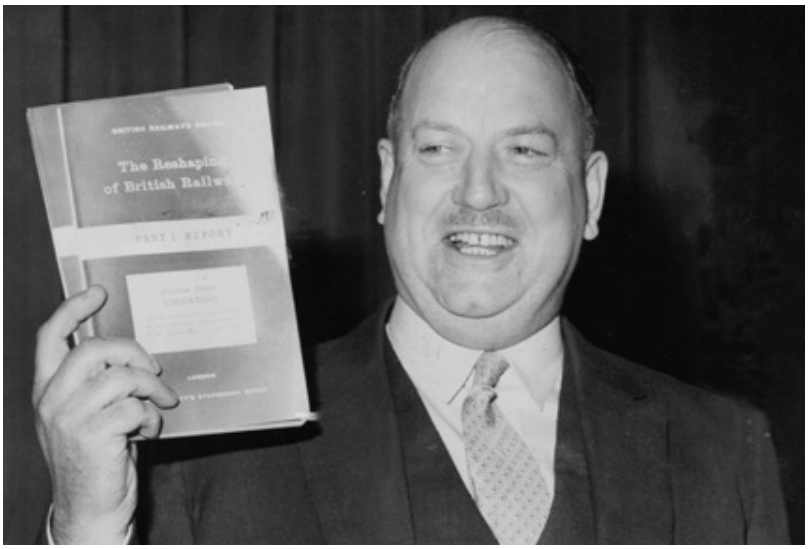
New roads were being built for cars to travel more quickly from one place to another, but this resulted in increased traffic congestion in towns and villages. The Minister of Transport, Ernest Marples (1959–64) said, "Towns of the future must be rebuilt to come to terms with the motor vehicle".[14] New towns had been planned with cars in mind – Stevenage was the first of these with its town centre designed entirely for pedestrians. Towns that had to be heavily rebuilt after the war, like Plymouth, included car parks and loading bays for lorries in their new town centre designs. Other towns had to adapt to increasing traffic. Traffic wardens, parking meters and yellow lines were introduced in 1960 to try to control parking in towns. The first push-button pedestrian crossing came into use in 1962. The 1963 Buchanan report, *Traffic in Towns*, investigated the problems of congestion and the need for car parking, and considered one-way systems, urban clearways and pedestrian precincts.

New roads resulted in increasing numbers of road injuries and deaths. The **MOT** test was introduced in 1960 to make sure that cars were built and maintained to certain safety standards. The issue of road safety was very important to Barbara Castle when she became Minister of Transport in 1965. There were 8,000 road deaths a year. She brought in the unpopular, but necessary, Road Safety Act 1967. This banned people from driving for a year if they were caught drunk-driving, introduced a maximum speed limit of 70mph and made seat belts compulsory in the front seats of all new cars (rear was in 1987). This immediately led to a 20% reduction in road deaths.

[13] This is quoted in *Yesterday's Britain: The illustrated story of how we lived, worked and played in this century* (Reader's Digest, 1998), page 258.

[14] From Ernest Marples' statement to the House of Commons 1964 which may be seen at: http://goo.gl/fJ4gjy

3) The 'Beeching axe' and the British Railway Network



Source 9: Dr Richard Beeching holding a copy of his 1963 report proposing the closure of a third of Britain's railway

Railways were part of the British way of life. At the beginning of the 1950s every town and most large villages had their own railway stations and railways. People could go to most places on the train and just needed a timetable to work out when and where to change. The railways connected towns to each other along the main lines, but they were also one of the main ways that rural communities were connected to one other, as well as to towns, through the branch lines which ran off the main lines. Trainspotting had even become one of the most popular hobbies for young boys.

In the early 1950s the newly nationalised[15] British Rail was making a profit, but by 1960 it had losses of £68 million and by 1962 this had grown to £104 million. The British Transport Commission had made the railways a lot more productive – in 1952 they carried 12 million tons more than 1948, and with 4,000 fewer employees, 1,500 fewer locomotives and 100,000 wagons.[16] But it still was not enough.

To rectify the losses, it was decided that Britain's nineteenth-century railways would be modernised. Diesel engines were introduced in 1954, and no more steam engines were ordered after 1960.[17] Electrification was not carried out very well and cost £1.2 billion. The Modernisation Plan of 1955 was aimed to increase speed, reliability, safety and capacity, to make it more attractive to passengers and freight. It cost £22 billion but still resulted in losses. The government limited the amount of money that could be spent without ministerial approval. The Conservatives had made things more difficult for railways when they denationalised road haulage in 1954 which meant that profits from hauliers could no longer be used to help railways.

In 1961 Dr Richard Beeching was appointed as Chairman of the British Transport Commission. His salary was £24,000, twice that of the Prime Minister, and caused a lot of controversy. Beeching

[15] Impact of nationalisation on railways clip http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02k8fqy

[16] Christopher Culpin and Brian Turner, *Making Modern Britain* (Collins Educational, 1987), page 108.

[17] A John Betjeman programme from 1962 about the end of the steam era may be seen at https://goo.gl/9YuvXp and another about a branch line railway from 1963 may be seen at http://goo.gl/2BFJ1D

was a businessman who had been an executive on the board of ICI. He was given the job of making British railways more efficient.

In April 1961 Beeching's staff were sent out to survey traffic on the railways. Their findings have been called into question. For example, they were counting passengers at quieter times rather than during rush hour. There was further controversy, as Ernest Marples, Minister of Transport, was much more interested in roads than railways. He had many links to motoring and road construction companies and openly said that trains were yesterday's technology, and that cars were the future. He wanted to see what was called 'bustitution' – buses replacing train services.

Beeching's researchers found that the quietest third of railway lines carried only 1% of the passengers and 1.5% of the freight, while the busiest 118 stations handled 52% of traffic. The foreword to his report, *The Reshaping of British Railways*,[18] published in 1963, stated:

> It was obvious... that neither modernisation nor more economical working could make the railways viable in their existing form, and that a reshaping of the whole pattern of the business would be necessary as well…Now, however, after the post-war growth of competition from road transport, it is no longer socially necessary for the railways to cover such a preponderant [*major*] part of the total variety of internal transport services as they did in the past, and it is certainly not possible for them to operate profitably if they do so.

Beeching recommended the following measures:

- Closure of all branch lines
- Closure of 2,359 local stations[19]
- Dismantling 8,000 km (5,000 miles) of track in order to reduce the network from 21,000 km (13,000 miles) to 13,000 km (8,000 miles) equivalent to 30% of the network – only 3,000 km (2000 miles) of track was actually dismantled[20]
- The loss of 160,000 jobs over 7 years.

Speaking in a public information film, Dr Beeching said:

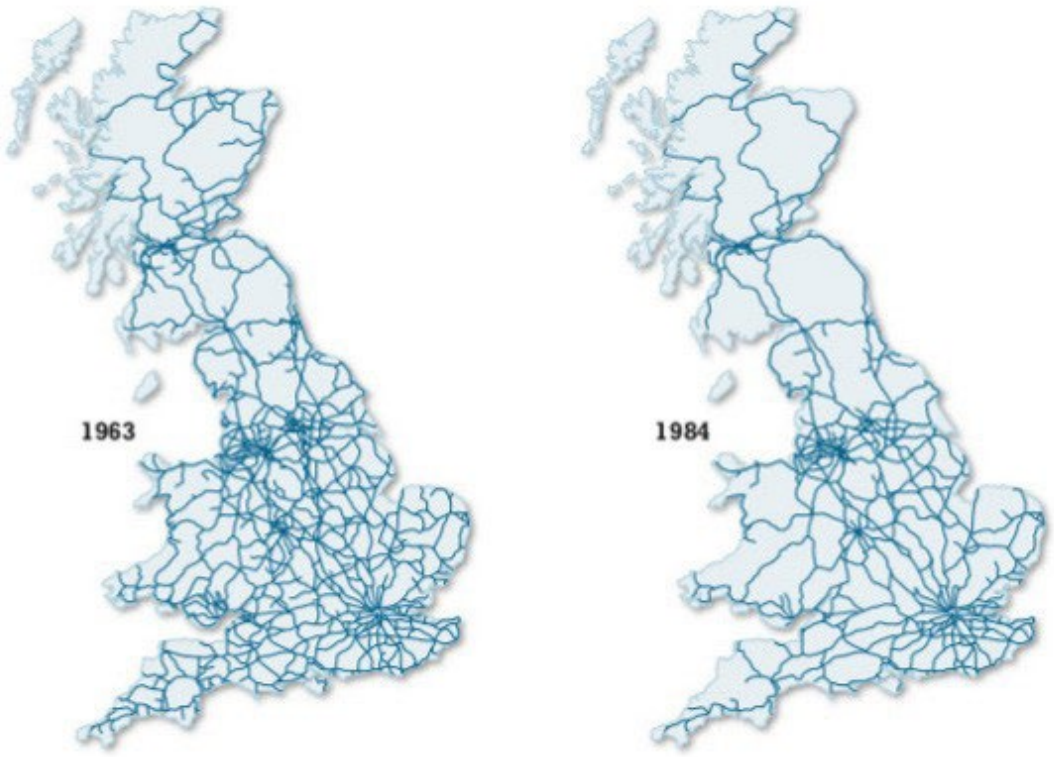
> On one half of the whole route mileage of British Railways, there is only one 20th of the traffic...the real question is whether you, as owners of the railways, want us to go on running these services at very high cost when the demand for them has very largely disappeared.[21]

[18] The Beeching Report from 1963 can be downloaded from http://goo.gl/LSQjKU (text) and http://goo.gl/PXJzaY (maps)

[19] Daily Mail article with good photos of abandoned stations etc. at https://goo.gl/sBq1xe

[20] This is explained in a 30 minute episode from the 1980s Channel Four documentary 'Losing Track' which may be seen at http://goo.gl/EDvscU

[21] The first part of a 3 part video (follow the on-screen links to the other two parts) where Beeching defends his actions may be seen at http://goo.gl/fCkT1C



Source 10: British Railways network coverage of the UK before and after the Beeching Report

Beeching's recommendations were carried out in 1965 and this became known as the 'Beeching Axe'. Beeching himself was made a peer and returned to ICI in the same year. He said, "I suppose I'll always be looked upon as the axeman, but it was surgery not mad chopping".[22]

Freight would now only be bulk haulage, e.g. coal, or fast containerised trains. The railways were now free to concentrate on things they could do well – fast suburban commuter services to carry large numbers of passengers. The station and branch line closures left many rural communities isolated and led to **rural depopulation** as people moved away to live in towns. Farmers were now forced onto roads to move their livestock, feed and crops for market.[23]

Railway romantics portrayed the Beeching cuts as an attack on the British way of life, while more realistic people realised that it was more about saving money and keeping the railways going in some form. The British Railways Board was rebranded as 'British Rail' in 1965 with new livery and paint for all trains and a more modern logo. Beeching's cuts did lead to the introduction of the modern Intercity 125 service with quieter and cooler carriages, double glazed and air conditioned, and reduced journey times. Heavily advertised in the 1970s, it brought passengers back to the railways after the Beeching cuts and post-Beeching price rises. Today some of the lines that Beeching closed have been reopened as demand for rail travel increases, and there are currently plans to reopen many more.[24]

[22] Jonathan Wright, '*The Most Hated Man in Britain*', in BBC History Magazine (October 2008), page 53.

[23] A 2013 BBC News Politics story about the impact of Beeching is at http://goo.gl/Ekh5Bq

[24] For current developments in Beeching's legacy, see the recent BBC News story asking if Beeching got it wrong, which can be seen at http://goo.gl/d7Vei4 and an article asking if the Beeching legacy is being reversed, which can be seen at http://goo.gl/6vkrnG

How did secondary education in Wales change between 1951 and 1979?

During the 1940s education in the UK had been very confusing and patchy. The 1918 Education Act had raised the school leaving age to 14. The 1926 Haddow Committee said that education should be split into primary and secondary schools. Because of a lack of money, by 1938 some 36% of children were still being taught the old elementary curriculum until they left school without qualifications aged 14.

The 1944 Butler Education Act set out to provide 'secondary education for all' by raising the leaving age for state school pupils to 15, which was implemented in 1947. A tripartite school system was then put in place with three different types of school:

- Grammar schools, for more academic children who took exams and would go on to study in further education
- Secondary modern schools, for more practical children who left at 15 without qualifications[25]
- Technical schools for academically weak children, although very few of these were ever built.

People referred to the quality of these different schools as 'gold, silver and lead', although the intention was that each type of school would have equal status and access to resources. The Act resulted in a substantial school-building and refurbishment programme. Spending on education doubled between 1947 and 1958. On the other hand, by the 1960s the average grammar school had three times the resources of a secondary modern and the pick of the best teachers.

The 11-plus exam (or 'scholarship test') decided which school a child would go to. It was not a completely reliable test – in the 1950s it was estimated that 60,000 students a year were in the wrong school and they were transferred up or down. Linda Shanovitch,[26] who went to school in the early 1960s, remembered, 'We'd been building up to it for ages. For years it had been impressed upon us at school how important the whole thing was. I felt that if I didn't get through this exam and do well, then I would never do anything with my life'. Not everyone saw going to a secondary modern as failure. TV personality Alan Titchmarsh remembered, 'I never saw it as a failure, just a sort of natural selection process that made sure that practically minded kids like me weren't lumbered with six years of serious academic studies that we'd never get to grips with'.[27]

By 1960 two-thirds of state-educated children went to secondary modern schools but many came to see themselves as failures. It is easy to see why pupils felt like this. For example, in 1964 only 318 pupils in the whole of the UK who had gone to secondary moderns were entered for A Levels. It was a very divisive system as more middle-class than working-class children benefitted from grammar schools. Studies started to show that IQ testing like the eleven-plus could be influenced

[25] Film footage of boys and girls learning at a Secondary Modern in Henley on Thames in 1950 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZTXlTTh_N8

[26] Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good* (London, 2005), page 421, referenced from Miriam Akhtar and Steve Humphries, *The Fifties and Sixties: A Lifestyle Revolution* (Boxtree, 2002), page 26..

[27] Alan Titchmarsh, *When I was a Nipper: The way we were in disappearing Britain* (BBC Books, 2011), page 123.

by a pupil's background and the ability of a family to afford coaching. It could also split up children from the same family or friends from each other.

FOCUS: Examinations

To measure the progress of children's education under the post-1944 new system, the first national externally-set exams came into existence in 1951. The GCE (General Certificate of Education) – Ordinary Level ('O Level') was taken at 16, and Advanced level ('A Level') was taken at 18. These exams were usually only taken by pupils at grammar schools. Secondary modern pupils and increasing numbers of comprehensive pupils could only take locally-offered school certificates until the introduction of the national Certificate of Secondary Education ('CSE') in 1965. CSE grade 1 was equivalent to O Level grade C. CSEs offered a wider range of subjects, many of which were more practically-focused like car maintenance. By the late 1970s many comprehensive pupils were taking a mixture of GCEs and CSEs

One of the other changes brought about by the 1944 Education Act was to give responsibility for schools to newly-formed Local Education Authorities (LEAs). It was up to these LEAs to decide how schools were to be organised and run. Some LEAs quickly decided that the tripartite system was not the way they wanted to run their schools and some looked to an idea that was working very well in other countries – the comprehensive school, where pupils of all abilities and backgrounds worked together in the same school[28]. In London a few experimental comprehensive schools like Walworth were set up in 1946, and London's first purpose-built comprehensive was opened at Kidbrooke in 1954[29].

Some areas went comprehensive because they had Labour controlled councils, like London. Others realised that there were potential savings in being able to put all available resources into one school rather than several different ones. There was pressure from parents of children who 'failed' the eleven-plus; they were a lot more influential as they outnumbered parents of those who passed. Other areas like Leicestershire in the 1950s and West Yorkshire in the 1960s avoided having the eleven-plus by reorganising their schools into primary (pupils aged 4 to 8), middle (pupils aged 9 to 13) and high (pupils aged 14 to 18) schools. In some rural areas there were bilateral schools where there was a grammar school stream and a secondary modern stream in the same school. By 1964 one in ten children were educated in a comprehensive school, as opposed to one in a hundred in 1951.

There was an increasingly heated debate about the advantages and disadvantages of the grammar school system. The government's 1963 Newsome Report suggested that the potential of many children was not being tapped as those who went to secondary moderns had not been given equal educational opportunities to those who passed the 11-plus. The debate continued on local councils and in national newspapers:

[28] Footage of comprehensive school in 1962 explaining rationale at https://goo.gl/6k2ptu

[29] Opening of Holland Park comprehensive in London 1959 video at https://goo.gl/8XPQtW

Arguments in favour of comprehensives	Arguments against comprehensives
• larger schools could offer a wider curriculum • it would be fairer because there would be no selection by exam aged 11 • equality of opportunity for all families • children would not be condemned as failures at 11 • people from a variety of backgrounds would get to mix	• standards would fall as the less able would hold back brighter pupils • more able students would not be properly stimulated • schools would become so large they would become impersonal • large schools would be difficult to manage and organise

The debate continued even after Labour's election victory in 1964. Tony Crosland, Education Secretary from 1965, allegedly said to his wife, Susan, "If it's the last thing I do, I'm going to destroy every ******* grammar school in England. And Wales. And Northern Ireland".[30] Scotland already had a separate education system. And yet Harold Wilson, Labour Prime Minister, had promised in 1963 that grammar schools would be abolished 'over my dead body'. He was a former pupil of Wirral Grammar School. Eventually Wilson would justify Labour's support for comprehensives by saying that it would guarantee a 'grammar school education for all'.

Crosland accelerated the process of turning schools into comprehensives. On 12 July 1965 Crosland issued Circular 10/65 to local education authorities, which said:

It is the Government's declared objective to end selection at eleven plus and to eliminate separatism in secondary education... The Secretary of State accordingly requests local education authorities, if they have not already done so, to prepare and submit to him plans for reorganising secondary education in their areas on comprehensive lines.[31]

There was no legal requirement for LEAs to respond but many authorities did. In 1966 money was made available for new school buildings, providing they were comprehensives. By 1970 only eight local authorities had not prepared plans for comprehensives. In the same year 1,145 comprehensive schools taught one-third of state-educated pupils.
Margaret Thatcher, the new Conservative Education Secretary, withdrew Crosland's circular in June 1970 but left the matter up to LEAs, who continued their comprehensive plans as they could save money by merging boys and girls schools. By 1974 there were 2,000 comprehensive schools which provided for two-thirds of state-educated children. Margaret Thatcher only rejected 326 out of 3612 proposals to end selection. She also raised the school leaving age to 16 which came into force in 1973. This meant another £48 million spend on new buildings.

Labour returned to power in 1974 and once again insisted that plans for comprehensive systems should be submitted. From 1976 they started to put pressure on the remaining grammar schools to close. Having all state education in comprehensive schools was never a national policy, and it was never the law that all schools had to become comprehensive which is why some grammar schools and other selective schools continue to the present day.

[30] Sally Waller, *A Sixties Social Revolution? British Society 1959–1975* (Nelson Thornes, 2008), page 110.
[31] Sally Waller, *A Sixties Social Revolution? British Society 1959–1975* (Nelson Thornes, 2008), page 110.

The debate about comprehensives did not go away[32]. The BBC started showing a realistic children's drama about life in a comprehensive school from 1978, called Grange Hill.[33] It caused a lot of controversy at the time because some of its storylines touched on sensitive subjects, and groups like the Women's Institute demanded it be taken off the air after just one episode. For example, one of the first group of pupils shown in the drama was a character called Benny Green who was a talented footballer, but he was also black and a constant victim of racism. His family were also very poor and teachers were often singling him out for not having the correct equipment, or school uniform or PE kit.

FOCUS: Corporal Punishment[34]

Corporal punishment ranged from a smack or crack with a ruler on the back of the hand, a board duster thrown at a pupil by a teacher, to being hit with a slipper, belt or cane for the most serious offences. This was supposed to teach pupils not to break rules again. It was not the pain but the humiliation that most pupils who were punished this way remembered. Corporal punishment was not made illegal in state schools until 1986, and not in independent schools until 1999. Some teachers had already started to stop using it in the 1960s. The Society of Teachers Opposed to Physical Punishment (STOPP) was set up in 1968. STOPP lobbied politicians to ban corporal punishment and helped families take cases against teachers and schools to court.[35] Teaching unions were increasingly against corporal punishment, although headteachers continued to support it throughout the 1970s[36]. It is still technically legal for children to be physically punished by their parents.[37]

Source 11: Secondary school pupils protesting against corporal punishment

[32]BBC Panorama programme about problems with comprehensives from 1977 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JY7ThNFtf68

[33]The first episode of *Grange Hill* may be seen at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-ATrUuBHRs

[34]A teacher briefly describes corporal punishment in schools on Stuart Maconie's The People's Songs https://goo.gl/fhevXk

[35]A BBC News story about one of these cases from 1979 is at http://goo.gl/4Caan0

[36]A clip about 1970s protests against corporal punishment can be seen at http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00g265v

[37]This is still an issue to the present day http://goo.gl/UHFZ14

Conclusion: 'Is it too good to last?'

While 'never had it so good' became a catchphrase for British affluence, the warning that Harold Macmillan delivered in the rest of his speech in 1957 is largely forgotten:

> What is beginning to worry some of us is 'Is it too good to be true?' Or perhaps I should say 'Is it too good to last?' For amidst all this prosperity, there is one problem that has troubled us ever since the war. It's the problem of rising prices. Our constant concern today is – can prices be steadied while at the same time we maintain full employment in an expanding economy? For if inflation prices us out of world markets we shall be back in the old nightmare of unemployment. The older ones among you will know what this meant. I hope the younger ones never have to learn it.[38]

During the years of the Depression in the 1930s Harold Macmillan had been the MP for Stockton-on-Tees in the industrial north-east of England. He had seen the terrible effects of mass unemployment and feared that if inflation could not be controlled then businesses would go bankrupt and unemployment and poverty would rise again. Despite the best efforts of his own government, and that of Labour's Harold Wilson that followed, the nightmare would become a reality in the 1970s.

Glossary

Affluence	Having more money to spend
Manufacturing	Making industrial products
Rural depopulation	People leaving the countryside to live and work in the towns
Income tax	A tax on money that is earned
Purchase tax	A tax on goods that are sold – now called V.A.T. ie. Value Added Tax
Hire purchase	Buying an item and then paying for it in instalments
Convenience foods	Food that needed very little preparation
Council housing	Houses owned by local authorities but rented to families at an affordable rate
Owner-occupied	Houses or apartments that have been bought by the people who live in them
Dormitory villages	Places where people had their home base which they slept in, but travelled to work in another area
MOT	Ministry of Transport
Inflation	Rising prices

[38]Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good* (London, 2005), page 80.

Recommended materials

VIDEO:

BBC History File series:
20th Century Wrap 1950–1959 'Never Had It So Good'
Andrew Marr's History of Modern Britain:
Episode 2 – 'The Land of Lost Content' covers the years 1955 to 1964
Robert Peston Goes Shopping: Episode 1 – Seduction
Ian Hislop Goes Off the Rails http://goo.gl/NWWgWY

WEBSITE:

From Warfare to Welfare 1939–1959 https://goo.gl/Y4UnN8

Acknowledgements

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Source 10: Unable to trace copyright, please contact us if you are the copyright holder.
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