

# The Rise and Fall of the British Nation. The Land that Labour Built

Review of David Edgerton's The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: a Twentieth-Century History

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*This new edition of David Edgerton's book The Rise and Fall of the British Nation is timely and apposite given the unprecedented Conservative landslide in traditional Labour seats in the recent general election. Inevitably in the world of day-to-day, parliamentary politics, analyses of the defeat and prescriptions for Labour's future have been short term and even superficial, but given the scale of the defeat which has taken place during a generational change in Britain's relations with Europe, a deeper historical examination of the issues involved is needed.*

The verdict of received wisdom is that Labour's "Red Wall" — its traditional heartland of support in the North and Midlands — fell in the December 2019 election, inflicting the worse defeat since 1935, because the party failed to speak the patriotic language of the working class. Edgerton's characterisation of Labour and Britain in the post-war period casts an interesting light on the assumptions underlying this reading of Labour's electoral disaster.

The first point to be made is that considering Labour was rent with splits in 1935 it actually did rather well. This was when the foundations of the so-called Red Wall were laid. Labour's heartlands do not as is often supposed go back to the dawn of the industrial revolution. They are a twentieth century creation and owe most to the nationally oriented policies of post-war Labour governments. If the language of the working class in these constituencies is patriotic it is the Labour Party that taught them to speak it.

As Edgerton points out "Labour presented itself in 1945 as the true national party. Its manifesto barely included the word 'socialism' (which appeared once), or 'socialist' (which appeared twice)." Often taken to be an icon of socialist policy, the 1945 manifesto concentrated on a national programme of economic development. Welfare reform came a poor second.

The National Health Service, Edgerton admits, was a remarkable creation, unprecedented its universal character. Yet it had not been envisaged in any Labour manifesto and no new hospitals were built when it was created. Labour constructed "an austerity welfare state." The increase in welfare spending had been greater after the First World War. British spending on social services and health remained low until the 1970s compared to other rich countries.

Where Labour was prepared to spend money was on the military. Britain's military expenditure amounted to 10% of GDP during the 1950s, more than it had been in 1913 or 1938 and continued at more than 5% into the 1970s. Britain was, in Edgerton's view more of

a warfare state than a welfare state.

Labour was committed to maintaining Britain's remaining colonial territories. It fought a savage war in Malaya, perpetuating conscription to do so. The Kenyan Uprising took place under a Conservative government but Labour had made no move to abolish the pass laws that were one of the main grievances. The RAF base at Khoramaksar in Yemen was expanded. Repression of the Greek Cypriots continued, ultimately leading to a bloody civil war.

Edgerton resists calls to define the post war period as one of British decline, except in a relative sense. Statistics, he argues, show that Britain was at its most industrialised in the 1950s and 1960s rather than the 1850s or during the industrial revolution. Manufacturing workers peaked as a proportion of the total workforce in this period. "For the British working class the years from 1950 to at least the late 1960s were years of success."

Many of the older working class voters who opted for Brexit in the referendum and Boris Johnson in the general election remember this period as one of relative prosperity. Their political consciousness was formed at a time when "Labour could be seen as a nationalist party after 1945, indeed as the nationalist party. It put nation before class, it invoked national victories from the past, and not class victories (or defeats). It is not accidental that Labour prime ministers invoked the national interest again and again, nor was it a mere cliché."

Even as international competition intensified the Labour Party offered a solution in the form of a technocratic critique of British capitalism. British capitalists, Labour leader Harold Wilson argued, remained "Gentlemen in a world of Players". We, Wilson told the Labour conference in 1963, "are re-stating our Socialism in terms of the scientific revolution". Britain would be "reforged in the white heat of this revolution"

Edgerton makes it clear that there was no deficit of nationalism on the part of the Labour left. He admits that Aneurin Bevan objected to the level of military spending proposed by the Labour government. His principle reason for doing so, Edgerton argues, was that it risked damaging the national economy. He acknowledges that Bevan rebelled against the hydrogen bomb in 1955 but points out that he had come round to the idea by the 1957 Labour Party conference.

When he became Labour leader Michael Foot was pilloried by the tabloid press for his lack of patriotism but it was he who led calls in the House of Commons to send a naval task force to the Malvinas Islands. On economic policy too the left was above all national in outlook. The 1983 Labour Manifesto argued for national revival in terms not so very different from Wilson or Callaghan. The Alternative Economic Strategy championed by Tony Benn was, Edgerton concludes a "modernizing, techno-nationalist, productionist, autarchic programme" comparable to that of 1945.

However useful it is in understanding the political character of Labour, Edgerton's analysis has some contentious features. Firstly, he rejects any notion of an absolute, long term decline of British capitalism. Decline, in so far as Edgerton admits it, was only relative to other major powers. It is a view that can be challenged. Relative decline translates into lost deals, lost opportunities for expansion, lost investment and, for the nation state concerned, lost power and status. Old empires die hard and in the process can do a lot of damage.

The other contentious term is “nation”. Edgerton argues that the name “Britain” only became standard in political life and history books after 1945 when a British nation replaced the British Empire and the cosmopolitan economy of the pre-war period. Using the term “nation” in this way presents a number of problems. Can we really afford to ditch the concepts of nation and nationalism in the run up to the First World War or the Boer War?

As E. H. Carr warned, all historians have bees in their bonnets. Edgerton’s concepts of “nation” and “decline” might seem to be purely idiosyncratic bees in one historian’s bonnet, except that Edgerton’s bees seem to be buzzing in a particular direction. Writing in the *New Statesman* before the election Edgerton characterised Brexit as a sign of “a new politics with freshly invented pasts and futures” After the election, he was looking ahead to the break up of the United Kingdom under the impact of Brexit bringing an end to the “short-lived fantasy of the ‘British nation’.” Edgerton sees hope in the prospect of a new English nation emerging from the break up of the UK. Shorn of its pretensions to power, England would be “Less cocksure and more understanding of its real place in the world”.

The idea that we live in imagined realities and that nations are imagined communities is now well rehearsed. Edgerton’s kinder, warmer English nationalism, a nationalism with its imperialist claws clipped so to speak, belongs to that intellectual tradition, or perhaps to an Ealing comedy. Nationalisms are not imagined, they are forged by real economic interests and cannot be re-shaped at will. The concept of the imagined nation is a failure of moral and intellectual courage in the face of the horrors produced by nationalism. It is not so much a better form of nationalism that the left needs as internationalism

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