

A CLASSLESS SOCIETY



A Classless Society

A CLASSLESS SOCIETY **BRITAIN IN THE 1990S**

Alwyn W. Turner

Aurum

These should be the best days of my life.

The Wonder Stuff, 'The Size of a Cow' (1991)

GUS: After all, this is the caring nineties.

DAVE: Hang on, this is 1991. So who decided the nineties would be caring?

HENRY: Lots of heartless shits who work in advertising.

Andy Hamilton & Guy Jenkin, *Drop the Dead Donkey* (1991)

ANTHONY: If you and your New Labour Party sound any more like the Tories, they'll sue you for plagiarism.

Peter Flannery, *Our Friends in the North* (1996)

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Foreword

When I first began working on *Crisis? What Crisis? Britain in the 1970s* it was the autumn of 2005. Tony Blair had recently won his third election victory, the economy had been growing for thirteen consecutive years, and England had just been beaten 1–0 by Northern Ireland in a World Cup qualifying match. Now, as I come towards the end of *A Classless Society*, the third – and last – book in this series, Britain has its first coalition government since the Second World War, the talk is of a triple-dip recession, and England have been held to a 1–1 draw by the mighty Macedonia. It would be hard to see all these things as steps forward.

This was never intended as a trilogy. It started as an attempt to reclaim the memory of the 1970s, the decade in which I spent most of my teenage years and which was not then as well chronicled as it has been since. The project has been extended, into *Rejoice! Rejoice! Britain in the 1980s* and then into the present volume, because the story refused to reach a satisfactory conclusion. The crises that racked this country during the 1970s remained unresolved. By the time some episodes had been wrapped up – with the defeat of the trade union movement in 1984, for example – others were already under way.

To some extent, of course, this is simply because the division of history by dates is a necessarily arbitrary affair. Decades and centuries are artificial, crude concepts that seldom fit the objective fact. They do, however, have an impact on the subjective experience of time, the turning of the years affecting how people see the evolution of their societies. And the current book approaches its conclusion with the biggest of all such markers: the end of the second Christian millennium. Except that even that isn't quite the right place to stop. It was not until the re-election of the Labour Party in 2001, and the second decisive defeat of the Conservatives, that things seem to have been settled in Britain.

And there is, I think, a settlement to be recorded. The social upheavals of the 1960s, when a cultural revolution began to challenge the legitimacy of the established order, were followed by the economic and industrial travails of the 1970s. Between them, they destroyed the post-war consensus, which had always been a typically British muddled compromise of a mixed economy and a shared Christian heritage, held together by the fantasy of growing prosperity. That came to an end in September 1976, with James Callaghan's speech to the Labour Party conference. 'The cosy world we were told would go on for ever, where full employment would be guaranteed by a stroke of the chancellor's pen,' he said; 'that cosy world is gone.'

The story of these three volumes is essentially the tale of the building of a new consensus. It's not as cosy. A sizeable minority of the population has been effectively excluded from mainstream society, historically terrifying levels of unemployment – however the figures are disguised – have become entrenched, and the concept of a job for life has long since vanished. On the other hand, sizeable

minorities who were previously excluded are now welcomed. The economic fantasy remains, this time built on a massive increase in personal debt.

The new consensus may not be sustainable. All things change, and this may not last as long as the previous settlement – at the time of writing, it is still unclear what impact the financial crisis that began in 2008 will have. But it is at least the end of a cycle that began with the right-wing backlash against the 1960s and culminated with the victory of liberalism, in all its economic, social and cultural forms.

Alwyn W. Turner

May 2013

Intro

Nineties

‘From despair to where’

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

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

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

The use of the line in *Our Friends in the North* was slightly anachronistic, since the episode in question was set in 1987, the year that Thatcher actually made the comment in an interview with the magazine *Woman's Own*, but the fact that it was still being cited in a television show screened nearly ten years on was tribute to its resonance. As normal with such quotes, it gained something from being seen in its original context. ‘There is no such thing as society,’ Thatcher had said, in a passage about how looking after one's own was not the same as greed, and she went on to add: ‘There is a living tapestry of men and women and people and the beauty of that tapestry and the quality of our lives will depend upon how much each of us is prepared to take responsibility for ourselves and each of us is prepared to turn around and help by our own efforts those who are unfortunate.’

That explanation of her moral faith in Christian charity, however, made less impact than the denial of society, largely because it failed to describe the Britain of popular perception. Many believed that

the precise opposite held true, that Thatcherism had unlocked a spirit of greed and selfishness, had played to the baser instincts of humanity. The rhetoric about civic responsibility was not seen to be matched by practice and – however much it infuriated some on the right of the Conservative Party – there remained a widespread belief not only that society did exist, but that it was inextricably tied up with the actions of the state, and specifically with the welfare state.

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

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

When, in 1990, Major set out his stall in a bid for the leadership of the Conservative Party, he promised to ‘make changes that will produce across the whole of this country a genuinely classless society, in which people can rise to whatever level their own abilities and their own good fortune may take them from wherever they started’. Six and a half years later, in his last press conference as prime minister, he returned to the same theme, saying that he wanted ‘the chance to take forward my belief in a classless society, where more of the have-nots are able to join the haves’.

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

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

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

something that might well be termed 'society'.

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

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

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

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

Blair was correct in his identification of the nation's mood, but ultimately it was neither his creation nor that of Major. Rather it was the outcome of two political forces born in the 1960s that reached maturity in the 1980s: first, the anti-establishment tendencies embodied in Thatcherism, and second, the liberalising identity politics that were particularly associated with Ken Livingstone and what had once been known as the 'loony left'. Between them, they brought into being a new Britain, characterised by a tolerance for diversity and a democratisation in social and cultural – if not political – arenas.

The popular icons of the age were those who most convincingly conveyed the impression of normality, reaching a new level when the Manchester United footballer David Beckham married Victoria Adams of the Spice Girls; despite their extreme wealth, the couple's appeal was that they were so essentially ordinary. Blair's determination to play down his privileged background, especially

when contrasted with Major's much more humble origins, was a recognition of that tendency, as was his habit of slipping a hint of the now ubiquitous Estuary English into his public-school accent.

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

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

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

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

The same disinclination to participate was not evident elsewhere. The great buzzword of the second half of the 1990s was interactivity, whether in advertising, computer games, reality television or – the biggest, most unpredictable development of all – the internet. If politicians were unable to lead, it was also true that the public were less inclined to follow. Some commentators began to talk about the growing redundancy of representative democracy and the dawning of a new era of participatory

democracy. Such developments were at this stage to be found only in cultural form, but then these were still very early days of what was still known as the information superhighway.

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

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

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

Indeed, Diana herself could plausibly claim to have been more influential in creating a new country. Since the 1930s, the royal family, under the influence of Queen Elizabeth, wife of George VI, had established a façade of middle-class normality in opposition to the celebrity glamour of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. The appeal of that image was acknowledged by Edward VIII in his address to the nation on his abdication in 1936, saying of his younger brother: 'He has one matchless blessing, enjoyed by so many of you and not bestowed on me – a happy home with his wife and children.' Diana found a way of bridging that gap; she was both more glamorous than Wallis Simpson and more in touch with the people than her mother-in-law's family. The Queen Mother, previously the most popular royal, had maintained her position by saying nothing at all in public, but Diana learnt early on how to use the media; treated like a film star, she responded by behaving like one, appealing directly to the public and claiming a democratic legitimacy as measured in column inches.

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

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

Again the phenomenon was initially cultural, but it swiftly acquired a social and political dimension. For if Major's talk of society, however classless, could be seen as a repudiation of Thatcherism, this public embrace of the 1960s was even more so. In one of her last speeches as prime minister, Thatcher had talked of 'the waning fashions of the permissive 1960s', but she spoke too soon. Even at the height of her popularity, she had been unable to convince the nation of her perspective; a Gallup poll conducted in 1986 found that 70 per cent of the population thought the 1960s were the best decade of the century, and much of the 1990s would see coming to fruition seeds that had been planted a quarter of a century earlier.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Granita was a product of its time, a narrow, almost colourless space with concrete walls. Steel chairs gathered around square, uncovered tables made of unbleached pine set closely together. It was not necessarily a place to be seen but, on a good night, it was a place to observe some of the rich and famous customers, who might range from the Conservative cabinet minister Peter Lilley to the *Monty Python* star Terry Jones.

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

It was here, on the last day of May 1994, that Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, the two brightest young stars of the Labour Party, met for an early supper to finalise their response to the death of the party's leader, John Smith. The most important element of the agreement had already been settled: that Brown, the older, more senior and more experienced man would stand aside from the contest to find Smith's successor, and allow his friend and colleague to run as the candidate for their faction within the party. What else was agreed – whether a deal was done that would allow Brown to succeed to the leadership in due course, and would in the meantime give him not only the post of chancellor in a future Blair-led government, but also wide-ranging control over domestic policy – was to be the subject of dispute for years to come, provoking a protracted feud in Labour circles for that generation.

and the next. Probably the most famous dinner in modern British politics, it inspired books, articles and documentaries as well as, in Peter Morgan's *The Deal* (2003), a television drama with Michael Sheen and David Morrissey in the lead roles.

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

Like its predecessors – *Crisis? What Crisis?* and *Rejoice! Rejoice!* – this book addresses what happened in the front and at the back of Granita, exploring both the high politics and the low culture of the era, in the belief that the latter not only reflects but often pre-empts the former. It is also concerned with the world beyond, with the very different realities that existed in the country, and that were even evident in the London Borough of Islington itself.

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

PART ONE

THE BUDDHA OF SUBURBIA

1990–1997

We are not slaying dragons any more, just cleaning up the shit they leave behind.

Edwina Currie (1991)

It's a great responsibility bringing a child into the world. You get all those embarrassing questions, like: What's a Labour government?

Helen Lederer (1991)

CHARLES FOX: Do you enjoy anything, Mr Pitt?

WILLIAM PITT: A balance sheet, Mr Fox. I enjoy a good balance sheet.

Alan Bennett, *The Madness of King George* (1994)

1

Enter John Major

‘The devil you know’

NORMAN ORMAL: I spotted the potential of John Major way before we realised he didn’t have any.
Craig Brown, *Norman Ormal* (1998)

ALAN PARTRIDGE: People forget that on the Titanic’s maiden voyage, there were over a thousand miles of uneventful, very pleasurable cruising, before it hit the iceberg.
Patrick Marber, Steve Coogan & Armando Iannucci, *Knowing Me, Knowing You with Alan Partridge* (1994)

‘I’ve always voted Labour,’ I said. ‘But . . .’ I hesitated. Suddenly the stakes had become very high. ‘But what?’ ‘But I felt secretly relieved when the Tories won.’
David Lodge, *Therapy* (1995)

John Major was a very young prime minister. In this, as in so little else, he was part of a trend, for the fashion, as the twentieth century progressed, was very definitely away from the older premier. In the decades either side of the Second World War, the average age of a prime minister was sixty-seven; in the years after 1960, it fell to fifty-eight before, in the 1990s, a further ten years were shaved off the figure. Much of that latter reduction was due to Tony Blair, who was often cited as the youngest prime minister of the century, being just shy of his forty-third birthday when elected in 1997. Less well remembered is the fact that the record he broke was that of his predecessor.

And perhaps it isn’t surprising that Major’s youth is so easily forgotten. He made far less play of that dubious merit than did Blair, giving the appearance of someone who had been middle-aged for some considerable time. There was too, when he became prime minister in November 1990, a higher cultural premium placed on experience than was to become the norm, and it was more important for him to emphasise his record in government, in contrast to that of the two opposition leaders – Neil Kinnock and Paddy Ashdown – though both were older than he was.

That record, however, was so compressed that it resembled a crash course in statesmanship. Major had never been in opposition, having entered Parliament in the 1979 general election that brought Margaret Thatcher to power. He had served as foreign secretary and then as chancellor of the exchequer, but these had been only brief appointments. Most of his three and a half years in the cabinet had been spent in the backroom job of chief secretary to the Treasury. Little known outside Westminster, he was far from an obvious choice to become leader of the Conservative Party.

His standing was illustrated by the media coverage that followed the political demise of Margaret

Thatcher in 1990. Having been challenged in an election for the leadership of the party by her former defence secretary, Michael Heseltine, Thatcher had failed to secure sufficient votes to win on the first ballot. She was then informed by her cabinet colleagues that she stood little chance of prevailing in the next round, and announced her resignation on the morning of Thursday 22 November, thereby freeing cabinet ministers to enter the race – an opportunity immediately picked up by the chancellor, John Major, and foreign secretary Douglas Hurd. That evening, the BBC and ITV news bulletins produced graphics to illustrate how the electoral process worked; both followed the conventional wisdom of the day and showed Major coming last and being knocked out, leading to a final third-ballot showdown between the flamboyant self-made millionaire Heseltine and the patrician Old Etonian Hurd.

In the real world, to the surprise of the media, it took just four days for Major to move into Number 10, having seen off both rivals with no need for that final ballot. His opening words to his first cabinet as prime minister summed up the mood of a perplexed public: ‘Well, who’d have thought it?’

The implausibility of his rise helped create an image of accidental premiership that he never quite threw off. As prime minister, he served for longer than, say, Clement Attlee, David Lloyd George or Edward Heath, longer than James Callaghan and Neville Chamberlain put together, and just a few months shy of Harold Macmillan, yet he made less impression than any of those figures even at the time. In retrospect his premiership is remembered by many as being little more than a brief interregnum. Indeed that was the view of the *Independent*’s editor, Andrew Marr, even as Major was leaving office: ‘he was what happened after Margaret Thatcher and before Tony Blair.’ Others were less certain of his role. ‘I simply find myself asking: Does he really exist?’ commented the veteran MP Enoch Powell in 1991, and if that was unnecessarily cruel, it reflected a widespread perception. Satirists, used to the raw red meat of anti-Thatcher savagery, were at a loss to know how to caricature this mild, affable but seemingly bland embodiment of suburban man. Guy Jenkin, the co-creator of Channel 4’s topical sitcom *Drop the Dead Donkey*, recalled that ‘Trying to write jokes about John Major was like trying to write jokes about grass growing,’ and his writing partner, Andy Hamilton, agreed: ‘They were dull days for comedy writers.’ Their best joke in those early days came with the concept of a John Major-o-gram: ‘They send round a bloke in a suit. He stands here for ten minutes, no one notices him and he goes away again.’

The satirical puppet series *Spitting Image* reached much the same conclusion. On air at the time of the change in leadership, the programme’s first attempt to depict Major showed him with a radio antenna on his head, so that Thatcher could operate him by remote control, but when the show returned for its next series in 1991, it had devised a more enduring incarnation: a puppet sprayed all over with grey paint who had an unhealthy obsession with peas and starred in a new feature, ‘The Life of John Major – the most boring story ever told’. The greyness became the defining public image of the man so that when, in 1992, someone drew a Hitler moustache on a portrait of Thatcher in the House of Commons, Neil Kinnock could joke on *Have I Got News for You*: ‘Next week they’re going to colour in John Major.’ He was by common consensus dull, boring and lacking in glamour; in 1996 readers of the BBC’s *Clothes Show Magazine* voted him ‘the person they would least like to see in his underpants’.

Major’s voice, too, with its slightly strangled, expressionless tone and its tendency to pronounce the word ‘want’ as ‘wunt’, came in for mockery. ‘He doesn’t speak English,’ raged the irascible newsreader Henry Davenport in *Drop the Dead Donkey*, ‘he speaks Croydonian, an incomprehensible suburban dialect,’ while the comedian Jo Brand concluded that he ‘talks like a minor Dickens character on acid’. The view from abroad was no more encouraging. The French newspaper *Le Figaro* nicknamed him ‘Monsieur Ordinaire’, while even the Belgians – not universally renowned as the most vibrant and colourful people in Europe – were unimpressed: ‘In his grey Marks and Spencer suit, he i

hardly a charismatic figure,' sniffed the Brussels-based daily *Le Soir*.

Yet this allegedly grey man had risen to become prime minister, leader of the most successful political party in the history of democracy. Not for nothing was one of his early biographies titled *The Major Enigma*; there had to be more here than met the casual eye. And behind the demure demeanour it transpired, there lurked a shrewd and effective political operator. His closest friend in the Commons, Chris Patten, was later to describe him as 'very, very competent – the best of our political generation', while the BBC's political editor John Cole wrote: 'he was more politically astute than his critics, and had run rings around them.' Nor was his appeal confined to Westminster: in the 1992 general election Major secured for the Conservatives the largest popular vote ever recorded by a British political party, despite the supposedly widespread opinion that he was deeply uninspiring. Even with all the derision directed at him, he was, for a while, genuinely popular. 'The public liked him,' wrote Michael Heseltine with a truthful simplicity.

And in person he was clearly very likeable, displaying a generosity of spirit that is not always evident in politics. In January 1991 the veteran socialist Eric Heffer, now riddled with cancer, made what was clearly going to be his last ever appearance in the House of Commons to vote against Britain's involvement in the war against Saddam Hussein. Before the debate began, Major crossed the floor of the chamber, knelt beside the dying man and had a private conversation, an emotionally charged gesture that provoked an outbreak of applause from MPs of both sides. Tony Benn, in tears at the condition of the man who was probably his closest friend at Westminster, noted in his diary: 'I have never, in forty years, heard anyone clapping in the House of Commons. Eric was overwhelmed.'

Major was also very tactile, offering men a two-handed handshake and flirting with women to great effect, so that even political opponents were disarmed. John Prescott's wife, Pauline, was said to have been 'bowled over by how witty and charming he was', while the hardened Eurosceptic Teresa Gorman was almost persuaded to abandon her rebellious inclinations and vote with her own government, as Major sat holding her hand and talking gently to her: 'It was very seductive; I could feel myself tingling all over.' At a dinner thrown by the Speaker of the House of Commons, Paddy Ashdown saw the prime minister chatting up Labour's former deputy leader Margaret Beckett with a line worthy of a *Carry On* script: 'Would you like a nibble of my mace?' As Ashdown remarked, 'He is a terrible flirt!'

Major had too a gift for personal communication when meeting the electorate that hadn't been noted in his predecessor, though his empathy was less evident in the heated environment of the House of Commons or when delivering platform speeches. In an age that was, we were repeatedly told, dominated by television, he was adjudged by many to be a poor performer on the small screen, though some of his charm evidently came through. The journalist John Diamond attended a dinner party in 1991 at which a woman 'listed for the amazed assembly the things she would gladly do with John Major between a pair of satin sheets'. It was, noted Diamond, the men, not the women, who were puzzled by this declaration and who demanded clarification of the prime minister's inexplicable sex appeal.

Perhaps the issue did ultimately come down to gender. The commentators, critics and comedians of the time were predominantly male, while Major's air of quiet self-assurance and mild coquettishness played best with female voters, many of whom had deserted the Conservative Party during Thatcher's incumbency. 'His polling figures, especially among women, are amazing,' marvelled Chris Patten in 1991. The very ordinariness of the man, his decency and honesty, however mocked, was an appealing attribute and was deliberately played up. Major himself was clear that he wanted 'to be prime minister without changing, without losing the interests that every other Briton had, without having no time for holidays, no time for sport, no time for anything but the higher things of life'. The restoration of normality was, to use a phrase often associated with him, most agreeable.

Much of this was only to emerge as Major's premiership wore on. Certainly it was of less significance over those few days in November 1990, as Tory MPs considered who was to succeed Thatcher as their leader. Then there was just one overriding question: which of the candidates was most Thatcherite and could best protect the legacy? Loyalists, outraged at her defenestration, wished to keep the flame alive, while even some of the regicides were troubled by feelings of guilt over what they had done and sought to make amends. Their verdict rapidly became clear. 'Most Tory backbenchers regard Mr Major as the most Thatcherite of the three contenders,' reported *The Times*, 'although it is something of a mystery why he should have acquired this reputation.'

Major's privately expressed position was clear – 'I'm not a Thatcherite, never have been' – but in public that mystery remained unsolved and, for the moment at least, largely unaddressed. His campaign team for the leadership election included most of the leading right-wingers, the likes of Norman Lamont, Michael Howard, Peter Lilley and Norman Tebbit, while his victory was greeted rapturously by Thatcher herself. 'It's everything I've dreamt of for such a long time,' she said, as she embraced Major's wife, Norma, on the night of his triumph; 'the future is assured.' Within a year, Thatcher was telling her friend, the journalist Woodrow Wyatt, that 'I think he has deceived me,' and although the truth was rather that she had deceived herself, her sense of betrayal was shared by many on the right of the party, contributing heavily to the disloyalty that became increasingly prevalent amongst Conservative MPs in the 1990s.

As chancellor, Major had taken Britain into the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM), tying the value of sterling to that of the deutschmark. Given that record, how could the Eurosceptic supporters of Thatcher have persuaded themselves that he was on their side? Part of the answer was his demonstrable dryness in economic matters. His espousal of the ERM was based on counter-inflationary concerns, rather than any great enthusiasm for the European project, and his one well-known quote as chancellor, as the country slid into recession, was to urge resolution in the fight against inflation: 'If it isn't hurting, it isn't working.' Beyond that, there was a studied refusal to reveal anything much about his own political beliefs. He was associated with no particular faction in the party, had written no influential papers for think tanks, delivered no speeches that anyone had noticed, appeared at not a single press conference during the 1987 election campaign.

Many years later, when he was in opposition, Major was asked by a colleague, Michael Spicer, where he had really stood on the great European questions that had dominated his premiership. 'He smiles and makes no audible response,' wrote Spicer in his diary. 'I suppose that is how he became prime minister in the first place.' Others had spotted this characteristic earlier. 'His whole life,' noted the Tory MP Edwina Currie, his former lover who knew him better than most, 'has the waft of an opportunistic silence reflecting tremendous self-discipline.'

Equally important to his image as a Thatcherite, however, was a simple cultural perception of his humble origins. His father was a trapeze artist in the music halls, who had moved with some success into the garden ornaments business, before the bottom dropped out of the gnome market on the outbreak of the Second World War. By the time John Major was born in 1943, the family had suffered a severe fall in living standards, and he grew up in straitened circumstances in South London, leaving school with just three O-levels. The fact that he subsequently rose so high was entirely due to his involvement in the Conservative Party, and was seen as a fine illustration of a new meritocracy. 'What does the Conservative Party offer a working class kid from Brixton?' asked a Tory election poster in 1992. 'They made him prime minister.' In all the tribulations that were to come, he clung on to this. 'I love my party,' he explained in later years, contrasting himself with his predecessor. 'She never loved the party. That was the difference.'

Major was clearly not cast in the same mould as, say, Douglas Hurd – the former Eton head boy turned diplomat, whose father and grandfather had both been MPs – rather his story seemed the living

embodiment of Thatcher's promises to those who aspired to better themselves. It was widely assumed therefore that he bought into her ideology. Certainly that was her feeling. 'I don't want old style, old Etonian Tories of the old school to succeed me,' she observed. 'John Major is someone who has fought his way up from the bottom and is far more in tune with the skilled and ambitious and worthwhile working classes than Douglas Hurd is.'

There was at least some truth in this perception. As prime minister, Major's evocation of a classless society echoed Thatcher's mindset, even as it pointed the way forward to Tony Blair and New Labour. 'I want to bring into being a different kind of country,' he said in 1991, 'to bury forever old divisions in Britain between North and South, blue-collar and white-collar, polytechnic and university. They're old style, old hat.' The one-nation theme and the emphasis on newness was to become very familiar with Blair, but that specific proposal – of removing divisions in further education – was reminiscent of Thatcher's assault on the pillars of the establishment.

It also, of course, came from a man who had left school at the age of sixteen, and it revealed an insecurity that he mostly kept hidden. Sitting at a cabinet table still dominated by ex-public schoolboys, he was in a small minority of those who had been state educated, and he was entirely alone as a non-graduate. The subject of his restricted education was eagerly seized upon by a press desperately trying to find an angle on the man. 'Never has so much been written about so little,' he commented, in one of his best lines, but it was clearly an important part of his make-up. 'He is terribly lacking in confidence in himself, especially all the social things,' observed Chris Patten. That awkwardness was to play an important role in Major's premiership, amplified by the sheer bloody-mindedness that had been required to take him from Brixton to Downing Street. For the immediate future, however, the momentum of the leadership election was sufficient to give him a chance to establish a new style.

Even so, his first cabinet demonstrated a strong continuity with Thatcher. Many of her ministers remained in place, while those who were introduced or promoted were mostly acceptable to the right wing; Norman Lamont became chancellor and places were found for Michael Howard and for a returning Kenneth Baker. The one controversial decision was to bring Michael Heseltine back into the fold after five years on the back benches.

As the man who had ended Thatcher's premiership, Heseltine was loathed by many of her supporters, but it would have been perverse if his talents had not been utilised. Regardless of ideology he was one of the few genuine stars that the party had at its disposal, as he demonstrated on his return to the conference platform in 1991. Reviving his celebrated line in knockabout humour, he mocked the Labour Party's attempts to rebrand itself by launching into songs from *Oliver!* – 'Who will buy my sweet red roses?' and 'You've got to pick a pocket or two' – while suggesting that the opposition leader, Neil Kinnock, was a dead ringer for the Artful Dodger. It was rare for a report of a Heseltine speech not to use the word 'bravura', and there were few senior Tories of whom that could be said. 'He is very like an ancient matinée idol in an MGM movie,' noted the television personality Gyles Brandreth; 'the performance is stagey and the colour isn't quite true, but there's still something rather compelling about it.'

Displaying a shrewd sense of politics, Major appointed his former rival to be environment secretary, charged in the first instance with finding a replacement for what was now known almost universally as 'the hated poll tax', the abolition of which had been the cornerstone of Heseltine's challenge for the leadership. The result was the creation of a new charge on property to fund local authorities, the council tax, and, as an interim measure, while that was being introduced, a reduction in the level of the poll tax by £140 per person, funded by a rise in VAT from 15 to 17.5 per cent. (To no one's great surprise, the temporary VAT increase was never rescinded.) Further popular moves by the government came with a rise in child benefit – which had been frozen for three years – and a long-

overdue award of compensation to haemophiliacs infected with HIV as a result of their treatment by the NHS, though of course this came too late for the many who had already died. Clear signals were being sent that this was a new, more compassionate Conservatism, and the Tories enjoyed an immediate boost in their opinion poll ratings.

There were other items outstanding on Major's desk as he took office. Chief amongst them was the imminent war against Iraq, a nation then ruled by Saddam Hussein, whose troops had invaded the neighbouring country of Kuwait in August 1990. Margaret Thatcher had led the international response to the invasion, pushing the American president, George Bush, into committing his country to military action, and already some 14,000 British troops were in position in the region as part of a United Nations-approved coalition.

Although the change in prime minister on the very brink of hostilities was far from ideal ('It distracted us from the business of facing up to Saddam Hussein and created a damaging sense of uncertainty,' noted General Peter de la Billière, commander of the British forces), there was never any doubt that Major would follow through on his predecessor's resolve. What was at question was how effective a war leader he would be, and for some the answer came as a surprise. Displaying neither bellicosity during the conflict nor triumphalism afterwards, Major proved to be popular amongst the troops, while his homely style – he ended his television broadcast on the eve of war with the words 'God bless' – helped distance him from the confrontational legacy of Thatcher. Similarly the shots of him, in casual trousers and a jumper, addressing the soldiers, making no pretence at being anything other than a civilian, played very well back home.

Overshadowed in popular memory by the invasion of Iraq twelve years later, the 1991 Kuwaiti War was, in military terms, an unqualified success. Five weeks of bombing was followed by a ground war that was shorter than anyone had dared hope. Within four days of the tanks rolling into Kuwait, the Iraqi army had been routed and the operation completed, despite Saddam's dire warnings that the coalition would face 'the mother of all battles'. (That was one of the phrases from the hostilities that entered the language, alongside 'friendly fire' and 'collateral damage'.) British and American casualties were remarkably few in number, and if Saddam remained in power, that was what had always been intended; the UN resolution authorising military action had talked of the removal of the occupying force from the sovereign territory of Kuwait, but said nothing of regime change in Iraq. Nonetheless, some were later to regret the decision not to press onwards to Baghdad, believing that it merely stored up future problems.

There was some opposition at home to Britain's involvement in the war, though nowhere near the level that was to be seen in subsequent conflicts. A couple of peripheral figures, Clare Short and Tony Banks, resigned from the Labour front bench in protest, but few noticed or cared; in any event, both had already resigned on previous occasions and a law of diminishing returns operates in such circumstances. There was, however, some disquiet about the media treatment of the hostilities. On the one hand, the new cable news station CNN showed what amounted to a nightly firework display as bombs rained down on Baghdad, and on the other, the American propaganda footage purported to show 'smart missiles' pinpointing their targets with unerring accuracy. In the midst of this, huge numbers of civilians were being killed and wounded in Iraq, though one would have been hard pushed to detect that fact from the coverage. Instead the most memorable images came from BBC Two's *Newsnight* programme where, in the words of comedian Mark Steel: 'each night Peter Snow clambered around in a sandpit, surrounded by toy helicopters like a spoilt child, adding to the impression that the whole episode was an elaborate computer game.'

Elsewhere the BBC exercised a degree of self-censorship bordering on parody. The comedies 'Allo 'Allo and *M*A*S*H*, together with a planned screening of *Carry On Up the Khyber*, all set during

previous conflicts, were withdrawn from the television schedules, while the BBC banned a bewildering variety of records, lest they give offence: not only obvious suspects like John Lennon's 'Give Peace a Chance', Edwin Starr's 'War' and Frankie Goes to Hollywood's 'Two Tribes', but also in an impressive display of lateral thinking, Roberta Flack's 'Killing Me Softly with His Song', the Bangles' 'Walk Like an Egyptian' and Lulu's 'Boom Bang a Bang'. A BBC spokesperson explained that 'Radio 1 realises it's got a lot of servicemen's families among its listeners and it's very sensitive to what it plays because of that,' but it was hard to believe that army wives, after two decades of seeing their loved ones depart for tours of Northern Ireland, were so fragile that they would be notably upset by an old Eurovision hit.

There was little to choose between the real Radio 1 and the version parodied in the radio comedy *Come with Me to the Hour*, which included a disc jockey named Wayne Kerr explaining that he couldn't play 'Puff the Magic Dragon' in a time of war 'because it reminds everyone of flame throwers'. Meanwhile the Bristol trip-hop band Massive Attack were prevailed upon to change their name, so that their best-known single, 'Unfinished Sympathy', was released under the name Massive and, more reasonably, the new Rolling Stones single, 'Highwire', which explicitly addressed the West's sale of weaponry to Iraq and the experience of soldiers involved in the conflict, was deemed unsuitable for broadcast.

John Major came out of the Kuwaiti War with his reputation and his poll ratings much enhanced, the most popular war leader since Winston Churchill. The other outstanding issue from the Thatcher years, however – the state of the British economy – was less easily resolved. The country was suffering a severe slowdown in economic activity that turned officially into a recession in the second half of 1990; GDP fell for seven consecutive quarters, and then simply refused to recover. We were, said Major, 'languishing in the no-man's land of negligible growth', though the more common expression at the time was 'bumping along the bottom'. Unemployment and business bankruptcies rose steadily, interest rates remained stubbornly high, and retail sales fell.

It was the second serious recession since the Conservatives had taken office in 1979 and, unlike that of the early 1980s, its impact was felt nationally, with London and the South-East hit as badly as the North. This time it was not just manufacturing that took the brunt of the slump, but commercial construction and the financial services industry, as the boom of the late 1980s juddered to a halt. Some forty million square feet of office space were said to be lying unoccupied in London, and even estate agents – those great symbols of the Thatcherite high noon – were suffering. The huge rises in house prices in affluent parts of the South went into reverse, provoking a wave of repossessions by mortgage companies and leaving many mired in a hitherto unknown state called negative equity, whereby the amount they owed exceeded their homes' market valuations.

'The politics of the property-owning democracy had come temporarily unstuck,' admitted Michael Heseltine in later years, and for many who had bought into the dream, the comedown was especially bitter. Disillusion was everywhere apparent, as Major, a longstanding fan of Chelsea Football Club, discovered in late 1991 when he met Vinnie Jones, the club's hard-man midfielder who also happened to be a Tory supporter. 'Sort out the fucking interest rates, will you?' said Jones, and Major could only reply: 'I'm trying, I'm trying.'

Little of this, though, attached itself personally to Major. He had been chancellor of the exchequer when the recession started, but his tenure had been so fleeting, so much in the shadow of his predecessors in the job, Geoffrey Howe and Nigel Lawson, that he escaped much of the blame. When asked in a 1992 Gallup opinion poll who was responsible for the recession, the answers split fairly evenly between 'the worldwide economic recession' and 'the Thatcher government'; just 4 per cent answered 'the Major government'.

Instead the flak was aimed at the new chancellor, Norman Lamont, largely because he projected

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