The Myth of Egalitarianism in Wartime and Austerity Britain

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Undergraduate Honors Thesis

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HIST495/496
11 April 2017
The Myth of Egalitarianism in Wartime and Austerity Britain

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in History from The College of William and Mary

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Map of the South Bank Exhibition: Festival of Britain 1951
INTRODUCTION

May 18, 1951. Welsh radio host Wynford Vaughan-Thomas stands at the top of the Shot Tower at twilight, and watches the sky darken. Across the Thames lie the Houses of Parliament, and below him, the South Bank. A former docklands and zone of industrial development, the new façade of the South Bank bears little trace of its utilitarian heritage. “And I was watching the lights coming up in Parliament,” recalled Vaughan-Thomas, “and then, quite suddenly, the South Bank lit up. It was overpowering — all London has never seen anything like it for brilliance and intensity. My companion turned to me and said: You know there’s been nothing like this since the Blitz, but you can enjoy this while in comfort… It was a carnival of light.”¹ Two weeks earlier, the Festival of Britain had begun.

The origins of the Festival date to 1943. Four years into the Second World War, the Royal Society of the Arts delivered a proposal to the coalition government that called for a centenary of the 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition – to occur “after victory” in 1951.² Following endorsement, the first wave of planning placed the celebration in Hyde Park or Battersea, where displays would highlight the sophistication of British manufacturing, craftsmanship, and industrial design. By March 1946, the appointed centenary committee had indeed pushed forward plans for a “Universal International Exhibition” in Hyde Park, with a new emphasis on postwar economic recovery.³ And yet, despite these efforts, the plans collapsed in the spring of

1947 when reconstruction costs and prolonged austerity measures discouraged parliament from funding a “corporate reaffirmation of faith in the nation’s future.” All the same, that November, then Leader of the House of Commons Herbert Morrison implored parliament to reassess its decision. The Festival was an invaluable opportunity for a “nation-wide adventure” to encourage “pride in our past and all that it has meant; confidence in the future which holds so many opportunities for us to continue our contribution to the well-being of mankind; and thanksgiving that we have been saved from the disasters which threatened us.” A strict focus on national culture and contributions to the arts and sciences helped to reduce the budget, and by March 1948, the House of Commons had confirmed Morrison as Lord President and Gerald Barry as Director-General of the Festival.

While the new budget cut funding for an international-themed exposition, the scope of the Festival remained just as ambitious. By 1951, London’s South Bank Exhibition included twenty pavilions that spanned the twenty-seven acres between Nelson Pier, Waterloo Bridge, and the southern perimeter of York Road. Following the “upstream circuit,” visitors wandered between exhibits on the environment, agriculture, production, shipbuilding, and transportation. On the other hand, the “downstream circuit” emphasized Britain’s cultural heritage, with displays on ancestry, literary history, homes and gardens, education, health, sports, and the

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5 Festival of Britain Office, The Official Book of the Festival of Britain (London 1951), 64.
6 King George VI to the Lord Mayor of London, 8 June 1949, in The Festival of Britain 1951 (London: A. White & Co. Ltd), 1.
7 Leventhal, “A Tonic to the Nation,” 446-447. Gerald Barry headed the Festival Council, formed of thirty-two men and women from throughout Britain who represented the associate branches of the Festival. These were the Arts Council of Great Britain, the Council of Industrial Design, the British Film Institute, National Book League, the Council for Architecture, and the Council for Science and Technology. Barry reported to Morrison, who reported to General Lord Ismay, then a member of the House of Lords.
seaside. Between the two circuits stood the Dome of Discovery, a colossal structure standing at 93 feet with a 365-foot diameter. Here, displays educated visitors on groundbreaking, British contributions to science, industrialization, and exploration, with displays on atomic structures, maritime navigation, nuclear energy, and knowledge of outer space, among other subjects. Were visitors to grow tired, the South Bank boasted fourteen restaurants and cafés. Were visitors in need of lighter entertainment, boats at Nelson Pier offered rides to the Festival Pleasure Gardens in Battersea Park. Here, attractions like rollercoasters, carousels, acrobatic shows, theatres, a bowling alley, zoo, and a bird sanctuary amused visitors before dinner at one of the twelve restaurants and a nighttime fireworks display. Altogether, from May 4 to its conclusion that September, the South Bank Exhibition saw over eight million visitors, two million of them from overseas. The South Bank, however, was only the main attraction.

In the summer of 1951, festivities occurred throughout the nation. Although the Festival Council did not subsidize local efforts to prepare for the Festival, they stressed that “the life and work of the British people, the ideas and beliefs which have formed their institutions, [and] their achievements…these are the themes of London’s Festival. But with our conception of a national autobiography, even the capital city…cannot show the rich diversity of the British genius.” In this sense, the Festival truly became a nationwide celebration. In the south of England, Brighton featured exhibitions on Rudyard Kipling and British literature and hosted an “international puppet festival” while Canterbury offered a nightly ballet based on Chaucer’s *Canterbury

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10 Leventhal highlights how Copenhagen’s Tivoli Gardens was a model for the Festival’s Pleasure Gardens. Leventhal, “A Tonic for the Nation,” 450.  
In Wales, Cardiff held cricket matches, a Welsh Industries Fair, and the small village of Llangollen, “in the beautiful valley of the Dee, with the high country of the North Wales mountains marking its horizons,” hosted an international Eisteddfodd (arts competition) that saw teams compete from twenty-one European countries with 10,000 spectators. From here, Festivities took place in Bath, Stratford-upon-Avon, Oxford, Cambridge, Liverpool, Manchester, and York into Scotland. Edinburgh arranged for orchestral performances, operas, and ballets, and Glasgow opened an enormous exhibition on industrial power that featured developments in areas like hydroelectricity, civil engineering, and atomic energy. In addition, the Festival Council organized for two travelling exhibitions. Whereas the land travelling exhibition stopped in Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, and Nottingham, the Festival ship, the HMS Campania, docked in ten major cities on the east and west coasts, including Belfast. Overall, the Festival was seemingly unavoidable.

Declared “a tonic to the nation” after the sacrifice and trauma of the Second World War, the Festival nevertheless served other purposes that departed from official marketing schemes. In an official context, “tonic” casted the Festival as an agent of national revival, revitalizing “belief and trust in the British way of life” and faith in the future. The term promised brighter days ahead, and served as a reward for those who had lived through darker days of the past.

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13 Ibid., 47-49.
15 Festival of Britain Office, *The Official Book of the Festival of Britain* (London 1951), 52.
“Tonic,” however, suggested a present that left bad memories of the past in the past. This sidelined "moments of misery, fear and loss” in order to construct an idealized and less distressing account of history. In emphasizing confidence in the future, stability in the present, and by selecting an agreeable past, the council framed the Festival as a milestone that marked the deliverance of Britons from the aftermath of 1945 into a new, modern era of peace and prosperity.

As such, the Festival projected an image of British solidarity and commitment to the nation that the Ministry of Information had used as propaganda during the war. “New Britain,” according to Festival, was a strong, contented, and egalitarian nation that had fought off Nazi invasion in a collective effort, with an “equality of sacrifice.” Accordingly, across class, sex, ethnicity, and politics, the threat to British sovereignty united “ordinary Britons” in a resilience that transcended moments of immense hardship and suffering. In May and June of 1940, commonplace residents of Dover journeyed across the English Channel in rowboats and dinghies to rescue stranded British soldiers on the beaches of Dunkirk. That summer, the groomed pilots of the Royal Air Force rose above the rolling hills of rural England to confront an intrusive Luftwaffe.

17 Connelly, *We Can Take It!* , 5.
bombs rained upon major cities and industrial centers like London, Coventry, and Glasgow.\textsuperscript{21} These three events, historians argue, founded the myth of the Second World War in Britain, where “the idea that the British were one people fighting a people’s war dominated popular culture, and it is in this vision that continues to inform post-war nostalgia” for a better world.\textsuperscript{22} At the Festival, Britons were together once again: in the past, reconstructed present, and into the lucrative future.

Yet Britain had not fully recovered by 1951. The peace had not lived up to wartime hopes and expectations for the postwar future, despite the Labour government’s success in founding the welfare state, nationalizing core industries, and ending Marshall Aid in January 1951.\textsuperscript{23} Austerity measures lasted well into the late 1940s, where rationing policies carried over from the war and subverted a wartime optimism for higher living standards after victory.

\begin{itemize}
\item the Battle of Britain” in \textit{War and the Cultural Construction of Identities in Britain}, edited by Barbara Korte and Ralf Schneider (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 225-240.
\item The Blitz came to symbolize a mythical moment of togetherness, where Britons adopted an indefatigable, collective conscience to preserve national sovereignty — a disposition that scholars like Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson have deemed “Blitz spirit.” Like Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain, the Blitz transfigured and then mythologized ordinary citizens into national heroes, and has since represented the climax of “Britain alone,” in which an inherently British resolve to endure challenging conditions grew during a period without the aid of foreign allies, and obliged German recalculation and withdrawal. According to the myth of classlessness, this British resolve transcended class boundaries. For more on the mythology of the Blitz, see Connelly, “London Pride has been handed down to us: the Blitz, September 1940-May 1941” in \textit{We Can Take It!}, Helge Nowak, “Britain, Britishness and the Blitz: Public Images, Attitudes and Visions in Times of War,” in \textit{War and the Cultural Construction of Identities in Britain}, edited by Barbara Korte and Ralf Schneider (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 241-259, and Angus Calder, \textit{The Myth of the Blitz} (London: Johnathan Cape, 1991).
\item Information Division of the Treasury and the Central Office of Information for the Festival of Britain, \textit{Britain Now} (London: HMSO, 1951), 2.
\end{itemize}
Winston Churchill and the conservatives had lost the 1945 General Election to Clement Attlee because “the British people in their majority obviously longed for a visible end to the war experience, for a break with tradition, and for a vision of the future that was recognizably different from or better than the past.” But fears that another world war would, like the first, bring a subsequent period of depression and high unemployment were fortified by protracted shortages and a severe economic crisis between 1946 and 1947. Consequently, “attitudes in Britain to the recent war were complex and ambivalent and the peace was associated not only with the expansion of the welfare state, but also with austerity, difficulty, national exhaustion, and decline.” Victory in the Second World War became “the nation’s last glory” as the Empire disintegrated in South Asia and Britain began to lose its status as a world power. Facing another general election in 1951, the time was ripe for a nationwide celebration that demonstrated the people’s “energy and determination in enriching the present and endowing the future.”

In the first years of the war, Britons had, in fact, been preoccupied with their futures. There was a strong desire to counteract the possibility of another depression by planning for the postwar years well ahead of time. According to Mass Observation surveys beginning as early as 1941, the public often expressed high hopes for a New Britain which was to arise from the ashes of war. The vision of an enriched, egalitarian society was “a powerful trope of social

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24 Nowak, “Britain, Britishness and the Blitz,” 248.
26 Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, 11.
27 Festival of Britain Office, *The Official Book of the Festival of Britain*, 12.
28 The public opinion questionnaires and “overheards” of Mass Observation, a British research organization founded in 1937, offer valuable insight into the thoughts, hopes, and criticisms of Britons during and after the Second World War. Because Mass Observation investigators recorded the sex, age, social class, and, at times, occupation of those interviewed, their reports can act as cross-sections of the British public. Their “overheards,” or written recordings of eavesdropped conversations, remain ethically controversial despite the absence of names, however. Mass Observation coded respondents as follows: male (M) or female (F),
transformation that figured prominently in wartime rhetoric.” where the war presented an opportunity to guarantee the postwar betterment of the nation. 29 Fighting the people’s war, then, enabled the people’s future. Emphasis fell on the longing to construct an egalitarian Britain, where the divisive socioeconomic barriers of the prewar years would crumble under pressures for greater social mobility and equality in living standards and employment.30 While morale decreased as the war continued, the success of the Labour Party in the 1945 General Election confirmed that hopes for the postwar era had reached a majority consensus after victory in Europe that May.31 Labour’s platform of “Never Again” not only ensured the impossibility of another war, but established a sense of security that Britain could not return to prewar conditions.32 Adopting socialism, the election revealed, was Britain’s next step to achieve an egalitarian society.

Of utmost importance, the aspiration for egalitarianism demonstrates that, contrary to the myth of a classless, united Britain, there was neither equal opportunity nor disintegrating class barriers during the war, it was just the opposite, in fact. As Sonya Rose states, “languages of nationhood, of a unitary Britain fighting ‘the People’s War’ fed expressions of class antagonism, subverting the very idea of a unitary British identity.”33 While the Luftwaffe did not discriminate

with age estimations at intervals of five. Social classes include the upper-class (A), middle-class (B), skilled workers (C), and unskilled workers (D). F40B, for example, is a forty-year-old, middle-class woman.

29 Rose, Which People’s War?, 33.
30 For a brief overview of British party politics after the war, see Tony Judt, “The Social Democratic Hour,” in Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945 (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), 370-372. He emphasizes the importance of the want for egalitarianism in the 1945 General Election. “It was the manifest justice, the unfairness of life before the war that drove…the overwhelming vote for Labour in 1945” (Judt 371). Note that this “majority consensus” for egalitarianism does not mean that there was a “postwar consensus” where all Britons stood united in domestic political issues.
32 Ibid., 638.
33 Rose, Which People’s War?, 68.
between aristocrats and working-class civilians when dropping bombs, those with stronger socioeconomic standings fared better during the war than unskilled workers sucked into the war machine. Angus Calder explains how rationing discrepancies existed between the classes, in which those with greater wealth had better access to food, clothing, and scarce goods.\(^{34}\) Moreover, members of the working class received considerable blame for production crises and periods of stagnation, where the upper-classes perceived workers as lazy and indolent.\(^{35}\) Even children, evacuated from poor, urban areas into the countryside, faced contempt from wealthier families who viewed them as unclean, dimwitted, and undisciplined.\(^{36}\) Although the Ministry of Information had sought to construct a myth of a classless society to certify that all citizens were contributing equally to the war effort, this agenda did not reflect the reality on the Home Front. Nevertheless, civilians still voiced hopes and created expectations for an egalitarian future, and in doing so, manufactured their own myth for an affluent, equal, and even classless New Britain that never arrived – despite the show put on by the Festival.

This thesis examines the construction of a myth for egalitarianism in Britain during the Second World War and exposes challenges to the myth under austerity in the immediate postwar years. First and foremost, the thesis engineers the 1951 South Bank Exhibition as a lens through which to track a history of hope for and disillusionment with socialist reconstruction legislation, when planned and when implemented.\(^{37}\) How did expectations for a better, egalitarian future clash with

:\(^{35}\) Rose, *Which People’s War?*, 59. This thesis will further demonstrate these prejudices through a dockers’ strike in October 1945 and a transportation strike in early 1947, considered in Part II.
:\(^{36}\) Ibid., 40-44. Connelly also highlights evacuation prejudices. See “Mr Chamberlain’s Face: September 1939-May 1940” in *We Can Take It!*, 42-49.
:\(^{37}\) Although the Festival Council repeatedly emphasized that the Festival was a nationwide endeavor, this thesis focuses on the South Bank Exhibition to avoid overreach. Moreover, the Festival Council framed the South Bank Exhibition as representative of the nation in its own right.
the New Britain delivered by the postwar Labour government? In what ways did this tension motivate the organization of a festival for the nation, about the nation?

Part I focuses on how the South Bank Exhibition demonstrated the supposed successes of socialist reconstruction, successes that fulfilled hopes and expectations for postwar egalitarianism. The analysis begins with a look into socialist reconstruction proposals created by the political elite during the early war years, with an emphasis on the Beveridge Report of November 1942 and how reconstruction talks influenced civilian morale. What then follows is a study of planning from the bottom-up, namely, the popularization of reconstruction among the masses. Here, the persuasive manifestos of cultural figures like H.G. Wells and George Orwell, together with the Soviet alliance in 1941, pushed planning into a utopian phase where the legislative formalities of official proposals gave way to desires for increasingly unattainable futures. Finally, attention returns to the South Bank as an ultimate assurance that the Labour government had achieved the building of a better, egalitarian Britain. As a result, the Festival served as a belated victory celebration marking the arrival of “the restored nation.”

This representation of postwar Britain, however, was idyllic, and at times, exaggerated and synthetic. Part II evaluates why this was so, with consideration given to disillusionment with the Labour government following the end of the war. While not all were dissatisfied with postwar reconstruction, the inability to see or feel notable progress in the early postwar years drained faith in the potential for an egalitarian Britain.38 A nationwide dockers’ strike in the fall of 1945 reveals immediate, working-class discontent with postwar living standards, and affirms

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38 This thesis focuses on postwar disillusionment as a result of the inability to realize wartime hopes for an egalitarian nation. By no means did all Britons disfavor the postwar Labour government. Research at the University of Leeds in 2016, for instance, found that British academics consider Clement Attlee (1945-51) to be the most successful postwar prime minister. “David Cameron rated third worst Prime Minister since end of World War Two,” Independent, 12 October 2016.
the continuity of class antagonisms from the war. Next, the 1946 *Britain Can Make It* Exhibition illustrates an early, official attempt to counteract dissatisfaction before the arrival of the welfare state. The exhibition seemed to have a promising payoff until crippling economic crises began that winter and continued into 1947, suggesting that Britain had reached a point of exhaustion and could not fully recover. The analysis ends with an explanation of how the South Bank Exhibition acted as an agent of appeasement, attempting to quell unrest and construct a narrative of postwar social harmony.

And so, the “tonic to the nation” not only sought to provide Britons with a reward for their mythologized resilience, but stood as a demonstration of reconstruction’s successes. In this way, the South Bank Exhibition attempted to pacify postwar pessimism by confirming the fulfillment of wartime hopes for egalitarianism and by giving recognition to those who had worked to build a better future. This portrayal of a united, mutually supportive nation stood in sharp contrast to the reality waiting outside the entrances to the South Bank.
PART I

Sowing Expectations of Egalitarianism in Wartime Britain

The downstream circuit at the South Bank Exhibition began with two pavilions that explored the diverse composition of Britain’s national heritage and its cultural identity. The first pavilion, which the Festival Council named “The People of Britain,” traced the ethnic origins of the modern state from the early Celtic and Pict migrations through the Roman, Anglo-Saxon, and Norman invasions before the tenth century. In ancient and early medieval history, festival planners found their origin story. Modern Britain, they established, was the product of a mixed ancestry, of tribes and clans whose descendants have since “contributed to the shaping of such a rare miscellany of faces as confronts the visitor in any London bus.”39 From Cromwell through the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the union of England and Scotland in 1707, Britons had blended into one united people, grateful for the egalitarian inheritance that their predecessors’ sacrifices now provided.

The second pavilion explained how this common inheritance had helped to form a national character, a collective identity and general psyche among the descendants. Named “The Lion and the Unicorn,” the pavilion gave life to the lineage, unveiling Britons as “something more than the sum of men with ancestors, children in schools, families in homes and gardens, [and] patients in hospitals.”40 Occupying nearly 20,000 square feet, the displays inside evoked the “compositions of various particular habits, attitudes, instincts, qualities and characteristic moods”41 of the island nation, those fundamental traits and shared “ideas which together make

40 Ibid., 117.
41 Ibid., 117.
up the British attitude to life.”42 Here, a twenty-foot block of Cotswold stone embodied the everyday Briton’s love of freedom. A plaster statue of the White Knight from Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* represented their whimsical nature. Works on display from figures like Chaucer and Shakespeare, Dickens and Elliot, reflected a nationwide and worldwide appreciation of the British literary tradition.

The showpiece of the pavilion, however, was an installation featuring two straw figures of a lion and a unicorn. Symbols of the political union between England, as the lion, and Scotland, as the unicorn, the installation dominated the exhibition entrance and signified a lasting accord among formerly warring peoples. The lion and the unicorn pulled with their mouths on two ropes attached to the door of a straw cage hanging overhead. Together, the figures succeeded in opening the cage door, freeing a flight of plaster doves that extended across the ceiling of the pavilion. Upon entering, BBC presenter Christopher Salmon expressed his adoration for the display and pavilion, stating “I love its wicker cage, its flight of doves. I love its flowers at the entry, detail of its tables and door handles… This pavilion of the Lion and Unicorn is a temple of the self, where you can see palpably… the English genius.”43 Salmon’s colleague, Geoffrey Boumphrey, was nonetheless skeptical of the installation. “What this means I don’t know, but I hope it may be taken to symbolize the hope that out of strife and war comes peace – in which case it may be something of an apology for the total omission of any reference to the British Armed Forces or even to the Police Force in the South Bank Exhibition.”44 Only six years prior

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43 Christopher Salmon, *A Fair Field* (BBC Third Programme, July 27, 1951), from British Library Sound Archives, 2min. 02sec., B2485/1/17.
to the Festival’s opening, the Second World War had concluded in Europe and in the Pacific. Merely four months before, Britain had stopped receiving Marshall Aid. While the war was over, memories of loss and sacrifice continued to shape the national consciousness.

The Festival was Britain’s true victory celebration, the state-sponsored time to reflect upon and admire what the people had preserved in face of fascism. For upon victory, a significant percentage of Britons were skeptical that the peace had come to stay – or was even achievable, according to the plans put out by the coalition government during the war. One woman in Fulham avowed, “I’ve never believed for one single moment that Hitler was dead. I’ve always been quite sure he’s still alive. I saw in the paper they’re not sure any of the bodies the Russians found are Hitler’s. I’m sure we’re going to hear of him again.”

More worrying was the uncertainty regarding the nation’s fate after the war concluded. To some civilians, June 1945 did not feel any different to the wartime environment. 48% of women and 20% of men interviewed by Mass Observation after the victory admitted feelings of indifference regarding the peace, finding that little around them had really changed. Moreover, 24% of men were discomfited with developments in international politics. One lower-class woman, aged thirty, stated, “Well it doesn’t seem like the peace to me. The war’s over yet things are getting more difficult.”

Another found peacetime conditions “pretty awful. They’ve cut the working hours down, and there’s a shortage of everything.” All the same, this pessimism did not stop early advocates for the Festival from continuing an unquestionably uphill battle in parliament. As Herbert Morrison reminded in April 1951, during a speech at the American Chamber of

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47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
Commerce in London, “I must say why we are having a Festival of Britain. The British people, as we all know, came out of the Second World War victorious with our Allies but weakened, scarred and fatigued, by the long and tough stand for freedom... And when they were bang up against it all for themselves, for the Commonwealth, they didn’t waver, stood for the faith, and believed that they would win, and win they did.” The Festival was an opportunity to confirm that reconstruction had finally brought peace and that victory was worth the sacrifices after all.

As such, the Festival of Britain sought to celebrate two victories. The first was the triumph of liberal democracy over fascism, which reaffirmed the strength and willpower of the British people that had prevailed through Dunkirk, the Blitz, and Battle of Britain. The second victory was the success of the Labour government’s reconstruction program, which induced similar national resolve when facing austerity measures until 1950. Though the peace had not brought instant improvements to standards of living nor had it restored Britain’s status as a world power, Labour officials believed that, by 1951, postwar reforms had finally led to national recovery if not a better world. Though serving as a reward to Britons for their resilience during the war and subsequent economic crises, sponsors had slated the Festival to mirror the expected successes of postwar reconstruction as early as 1943. Recovery, embodied in the Festival, became a promise that the political elite anticipated keeping. And while the initial purpose of the Festival was to commemorate the Crystal Palace exhibition, Director General Gerald Barry noted in 1952 that “as the progress of the war towards an Allied victory gathered momentum…it seemed that in 1951 the war was likely to have been over long enough to enable some valuable

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50 Herbert Morrison (speech, American Chamber of Commerce, London, April 25, 1951), from British Library Sound Archives, 5min. 54sec., B2485/1.
51 For more on the mythology of a national spirit of resilience, see Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson (eds), British Cultural Memory and the Second World War (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).
demonstration to be made by then of Britain’s progress towards recovery from her prodigious war efforts.” During the war and austerity years, the Festival was both a goal to work towards and a deadline for reconstruction.

**Teasing Reconstruction: Morale and the Beveridge Report in Wartime Britain, 1939-1943**

From the destruction wrought by the Luftwaffe upon metropolitan areas from London to Coventry to Glasgow, planning for reconstruction served as a political tool to strengthen morale. While the Ministry of Information, under the direction of Churchill acolyte Brendan Bracken, implemented a propaganda program centered on unity, the aplomb of the British character, and the alacrity of civilians to participate in the war machine, morale met challenges through the seemingly incessant bombardments of the Blitz. Showing the public that the government was thinking about the future, political elites judged, could prompt an increase in morale and heighten wartime productivity. Here, legislative frameworks for reconstruction were a new source of incentive, offering public benefits on the condition that Britain won the war. *A Plan for Britain*, released in 1941, called for universal social security, a minimum wage, and government-sponsored allowances for families with children. Sir Patrick Abercrombie, a professor of town planning at University College London, unveiled his County of London Plan in 1943 and Greater London Plan in 1944. Compiled as the Abercrombie Plan, the proposals encouraged the demolition of Victorian tenements, an expansion of parkland in the city center, and introduced new methods to minimize pollution. It was the Beveridge Report, however, that stole the show. Advocating for obligatory social insurance for all British citizens, the report offered “in return

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55 Ibid., 444-445.
for a flat-rate weekly contribution, flat-rate benefits...made for sickness, unemployment, old age, maternity, industrial injury, orphanhood, and widowhood.” Upon publication in 1942, no less than 86% of respondents to a Gallup survey supported it. Planning for an egalitarian future had become the latest addition to wartime Britain’s propaganda apparatus.

And yet, although planning schemes for reconstruction often adopted egalitarian agendas, socioeconomic discrepancies remained just as prevalent in wartime Britain as in the interwar years. As George Orwell asked in his 1941 essay, *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius*, “Is not England notoriously two nations, the rich and the poor? Dare one pretend that there is anything in common between people with £100,000 a year and people with £1 a week?” As the resignation of Neville Chamberlain in May 1940 showed, there was not. Associated with the old-fashioned political aristocracy, Chamberlain became “a symbol of all that was muddleheaded, incompetent, irresponsible, complacent, and, indeed, ludicrous about the first nine months of the war.” From his policies of appeasement to his perceived weakness as a wartime leader, especially given the failure of the Norwegian campaign in April 1940, Chamberlain’s reputation plummeted. In his place stood Churchill, heralded as “the finest leader we have ever had and...a friend of the working class. He is not a snob like Chamberlain.” Notwithstanding this, a 1943 questionnaire on “Industrial Feelings” by Mass Observation suggests that not all workers were satisfied to be part of the Prime Minister’s war machine.

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While 63% of men and 44% of women interviewed believed that industry was working efficiently, workers felt undervalued.61 76% of men and 75% of women thought that workers should have more say in the management of their workplace, and 43% of men and 40% of women found their salaries too low.62 Moreover, 52% of men and 43% of women thought that their employers’ profits were too high.63 This sought-after betterment of working conditions undoubtedly propelled workers to support reconstruction plans that called for a disintegration of class inequities. For the moment, they were cogs in the machine.

Socioeconomic imbalances did not necessarily create a climate of pessimism on the home front, but produced caution and hesitancy when voicing hopes for the future. Nevertheless, some civilians confessed a complete lack of faith for postwar conditions, with one 50-year-old working-class man predicting national bankruptcy and another stating pessimistically, “There’ll always be unemployment.”64 When Mass Observation asked one woman her opinions on the alliance with the Soviet Union, she said, “I’ve hardly turned on the radio since Russia started. Everything is so depressing…I don’t believe it [the war] will ever stop at all…If ever there is a bit of good news they can’t let you enjoy it, they have to keep hammering in that everything is going to get worse and worse and we musn’t feel hopeful.”65 This sense of desperation is particularly noteworthy given the interviewer’s estimation of the woman’s age, near twenty. She had not experienced world war before. Those who had experienced the First World War, on the contrary, knew that the war would end, but expressed reservation about its aftermath. In an essay competition on postwar hopes held by the British Legion, RAF pilot E.H. Longshaur wrote:

62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
“Although everyone has practiced ideas on how to survive in the postwar era, it can safely be said they all look back to pre-war days and will continue to do so, to what could have been.”

Even one woman who had grown up during the interwar years had learned that “we were promised so much after the last war. It’s best not think about it [the future].” For some, the specter of economic stagnation, unemployment, and shortages that followed 1918 provided little room for unreserved optimism concerning the future.

For others, Great Britain was on the threshold of becoming a socialist Cibola. “Huge changes” were on the horizon, changes that brought equal opportunity and no unemployment, free healthcare, better pensions at sixty, better housing, better wages, and government support for large families, widows, and veterans. As one man stated in an August 1942, “Well — I don’t think there’d be the depression there was after the last war. If they can afford the war they can afford the peace.” The interwar years were a valuable lesson, and the government was prepared for the next epoch of British triumph, where “the example of failure…should only be an incentive to a greater determination to achieve success now.”

One woman dreamt of an increase in pensions, so that “old folks…if they buy tobacco or go to the cinema they haven’t got to deny themselves something in food.” A second expected “all the slums [to be] demolished for one thing, every house to have a bath, and the men to have work.” New Britain consisted of modern flats, shopping centers, planned residential neighborhoods, and practical consumer goods. Houses needed gardens, flats needed controlled rents, and towns needed to be “modern,

68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
clean, sanitary, compact, and not to be a burden on the taxpayer.”

While one civilian wished for a “sunshine house, [with] one room to go the length of the house, and the other part to be divided for a hall kitchen and pantry, and three bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs, with a small garden,” another hoped for “a home of which I can be proud and in which I can, with my wife and family, enjoy the freedom to which we have contributed our sacrifices.” In return for the austere and unyielding conditions that they had faced since the First World War, civilians contributing to the war effort expected the government to lift financial burdens after the peace and finally balance living standards across the classes.

Enter the Beveridge Report, what Sir Ronald Davison, a civil servant, described as a piece of moral legislation that embodied “the creative idealism of our British democracy and its practical plans for a higher social order than any other country has yet dreamed of.” Penned by economist Sir William Beveridge and published in November 1942, the report proposed universal social insurance that applied to “every citizen, rich and poor, young and old.” It promised the erosion of class boundaries and provided a foundation for a more egalitarian postwar society. Following the establishment of a Ministry of Social Security and insurance reform, the plan in theory divided British citizens into six classes of contributors based upon income level. Class I consisted of steady wage earners, who paid the highest weekly rates in order to receive benefits. Class II included shopkeepers, traders, independent workers, Class III housewives and married women under sixty-five, Class IV unemployed students and single women over sixteen, with Class V being children under fifteen and Class VI being retirees above

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73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
76 Ronald C. Davison, Insurance for All and Everything: A Plain Account and a Discussion of the Beveridge Plan (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1943), 6.
77 Davison, Insurance for All and Everything, 7.
sixty-five. Yet only victory allowed for the installation of the plan – victory in the war, and victory in the House of Commons. In 1943, Davison reminded that “even within our country to win this goal of social security will call for self-sacrifice and a high sense of national unity and citizenship.”78 The adoption of the welfare state, he believed, required a national determination like the resilience fashioned under the strain of the war. Yet some Britons believed the report would provide instant relief from their pains after the war, and did not question its cost.

That December, a Mass Observation survey confirmed that the Beveridge Report attracted interest from a wide range of the British public, with approval transcending income levels. A clerk told of how, the previous month, he “joined a long queue outside the Stationery Office [near Kingsway] to obtain a copy…the people queueing represented a good cross section of the British public. I saw a policeman, a business man, a girl typist, an ARP [Air Raid Precaution] rescue worker, an army captain, and two men close to me were Frenchmen.”79 Not only had the report managed to capture the curiosity of military personnel, white collar and public sector workers, and men and women, but had even compelled foreigners to pick up a copy. Approval for the report came from a heterogeneous audience as well. One middle-class man proclaimed that the report “is the greatest measure of social reform of the century and should be passed into law at the earliest possible moment.”80 A middle-class housewife expressed that “if it should be adopted and prove workable it will change the whole face of life for working people and remove the main fears of their lives.”81 In this sense, the report truly offered a pioneering agenda that provided liberation for the lower classes from the ingrained, socioeconomic inflexibility of interwar Britain. It became “the working man’s Magna Carta,”

78 Ibid., 32.
according to one shopkeeper, in that the plan acknowledged the underprivileged conditions that struggling wage earners faced and introduced policies to diminish socioeconomic imbalances. When interviewed, a retired policeman voiced his support simply because the plan gave protection to disadvantaged Britons. “I consider it hard for us…who have never suffered from unemployment to realise what a nightmare the absence of security is to many decent working men. I sincerely hope they will secure it in the post war world.” The Beveridge Report revealed that the government had begun to consider the welfare of all citizens, and most importantly, the betterment of their lives following the war.

All the same, the plan had its skeptics. One upper-class housewife was particularly peeved when she attended a luncheon and got into “a real ding dong argument” with a Miss Woods and Miss Waite: “Talking of Beveridge and his ‘plan’ I was somewhat astonished to hear their attitude. They took the somewhat contemptuous line that he was a Liberal and it was ‘another 9d for 4d’ and saw nothing good in it…To hear Miss Waite’s remarks I must have been a moron, incapable of coherent thoughts.” Standard criticisms centered on Beveridge’s sanguine ideals for the postwar period, and saw the report as both unattainable and as an artificial incentive to motivate workers for the wartime economy. This was the “minority who saw it as a carrot, the people being the donkey.” At a public debate held in Stratford in 1942, between a local Labour MP and Alexander Anderson, a conservative MP from the Midlands, the report’s unrealistic expectations formed the basis of Anderson’s criticism. He revealed that between 1938 and 1939 Britain spent £342,000,000 on social security; Beveridge’s plan required a spending
budget of £697,000,000 by 1945. Likewise, one insurance agent “thought the report was a sop, intended to allay the people’s fears about the future,” and a woman admitted that her husband told her it was “a clever bourgeois pseudo-reform.” A Mrs. G found the report “merely a way of keeping people quiet… It’s ridiculous to give anyone £20 for dying but only £4 for being born.” This references the increased support the report ventured to give to parents upon the birth of a child and to children upon the death of a parent. As a clerk stated, “We are inclined to spend too much on funerals – especially the working class. I always remember the look of horror of the undertaker when Pop died and I arranged for his funeral. When in response to his enquiry as to what sort of coffin was required I said ‘the cheapest.’” While these criticisms show that not all accepted the Beveridge Report at face value, those who praised the plan nevertheless outnumbered those who expressed disapproval.

Because the report showed that the government had begun to consider postwar conditions, offered a window into a new, egalitarian Britain, and outlined policies to better standards of living for all income levels, Sir William Beveridge succeeded in raising public morale in the middle of the Second World War. Following the Stratford debate, an audience member named E. P. Ray commented that the report “indicates that there are men concerning themselves with the problems we shall have to face after the war and it is clear that the mind and the heart have been allowed to produce something of tremendous help to those who follow us.” The Beveridge Report exhibited that Britain was venturing into a fresh, modern era that

88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
distanced the island nation from the stifling interwar years and retrograde Victorian class system. Seeing the opportunities lying ahead pushed Britons to fight for the future. In December 1942, a retired schoolteacher stated that the Beveridge Report “revived my faith and made me ashamed of my defeatist attitude…the people of Britain had organised and determined themselves for victory in making a better Britain after the war.”92 A clerk remarked, “What tremendous opportunities are offered if only we can fight for them. It looks as if, after all, something good may come out of this war…I feel quite inspired.”93 As the critics had observed, the report acted as an incentive – however genuinely Beveridge believed in establishing a welfare state. When a farm worker expressed his support for the insurance scheme to his wife, she was skeptical, he noted. She “says afterwards, ‘Why not get on with the war first’ but when I point out that a lot of people are (perhaps subconsciously) not putting their best into winning the war because they fear unemployment and insecurity after it, she does see there is something in that.”94 As a housewife stated in her diary, “Never since I’ve listened to a speaker on air did I feel as interested as I did tonight to Sir W. Beveridge – I’ll feel a bit more hopeful about the ‘brave new world’ now and begin to feel [original emphasis] effort will be made to grasp the so different angles of the many problems.”95 Suddenly, there was an objective to winning the war that benefited the lives of everyday Britons, an objective that provided secure material and financial benefits. The report was proof that New Britain was on its way.

Like A Plan for Britain and the Abercrombie Plan, the 1942 Beveridge Report served as a tombstone marking popular departure of prewar Britain’s aristocratic order. The report arrived when workers began to feel discontented with the conditions of the war machine, and when hope

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93 Ibid.  
94 Ibid.  
95 Ibid.
for the postwar future had not evaporated but met reservations based upon the austere environment that had followed 1918. When Britons began to show increasing approval for an elaborate, postwar welfare system and for a socialist government, the report confirmed that these wishes were possible and even realistic ones. Garnering support across income levels, the report advocated for a regrowth centered on resolving modern socioeconomic imbalances that had existed in Britain since early industrialization. The report acknowledged that the working and middle classes had suffered from financial insecurity and inadequate living standards, particularly after the First World War, but this time, the political elite had a plan. In this sense, knowing that the government was beginning to think about and plan for the future provided the public with more incentive to contribute to the war effort, in order to achieve the goals set out in the Beveridge Report. As a teacher commented in December 1942, “It’s extraordinary that the government has let the cat out of the bag… it has been set forth in a government report that security is possible if human needs are a first charge. The quotation from Marx is apt – ‘war is the locomotion of history.’”  

With increased morale and heightened willingness to achieve visions assembled by wartime planning schemes, Britain’s war machine pushed on with the target of an egalitarian future.

**Selling Reconstruction: Utopianism, and Looking East in Wartime Britain, 1941-43**

The Beveridge Report turned postwar planning into a public interest. As of 1943, “there were more than one hundred unofficial organizations studying and putting out ideas and proposals on different aspects of post-war reconstruction: land and town planning, industry and economics, agriculture, housing and public amenities, education, medicine and health.” Encouraged and

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96 Ibid.
97 Mackay, *Half the Battle*, 222.
even empowered by the progressive broadcasts of H.G. Wells and socialist prophecies of George Orwell, Britons at the Home Front became more vocal about their expectations and suggestions for the postwar future. As such, there occurred a transition in the nature of planning, in which the political elite continued to release top-down reconstruction proposals yet to audiences that had started their own informal, populist dialogues. This ushered in increasingly wide-ranging visions for postwar Britain, where the 1941 alliance with the Soviet Union continued to generate sympathies for Stalin, the Red Army, and war in the east.98 Cooperation between Britain and the Soviet Union, while facing some dissent, nevertheless drew attention to communist frameworks for governance and social order, those that, some Britons perceived, had repelled the Nazis from Moscow with a functioning, classless society. The emerging tendency to look to the Soviet Union as a model for reconstruction, in order to lessen socioeconomic imbalances in modern Britain, thus characterized a utopian phase in reconstruction planning powered by the working class. War was the locomotion of history.

Wells began broadcasting his visions for the future on the BBC in 1931. Deemed “the father of science fiction” due to his commercial successes such as The Time Machine (1895) and The War of the Worlds (1898), Wells was also a political theorist whose frameworks for the future were grounded in the very real issues facing modern Britain during the interwar and wartime years.99 On November 23, 1939, three months after Britain and France declared war on Germany, the BBC called on Wells to speak at a “literary luncheon” at Foyles bookstore in

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He was to introduce Edvard Beneš, the then-exiled prime minister of Czechoslovakia, who emphasized the need for the West to begin planning the democratic reconstruction of a post-fascist Germany. First, Sir Ronald Storrs, an official at the British Foreign and Colonial Office, introduced Wells as “a prophet to whom it has been vouchsafed from early middle age to see his prophecies come true. Forty years ago, he foretold the airplane, the wireless, babble machines he calls them, billowing news from their foolish trumpet faces – no offense to BBC representatives here today.” This introduction demonstrates how Wells was not only a voice for the future, but a voice of the future, one whose visions were attainable and impending. In his own introduction, Wells praised the loyalty of Beneš in helping to restore a free Europe. Beneš was a noble politician who “has had all Europe in vision” and seeks “greater unity” between European nations. Wells looked forward to when Beneš and other politicians would have the privilege of “reshaping and reorganizing our world.” In 1945, Wells would once again prove his “gift.”

Wells’ January 1943 broadcast, Reshaping Man’s Heritage, was an appeal for the founding of a postwar egalitarian Britain. The nation had a chance, Wells believed, to adopt a reconstruction program that abolished toxic class differences and gave equal opportunities for employment and education to all citizens. Moreover, Britain was the precedent for constructing a worldwide political community focused on equality and the “scrapping of our inheritance of hate and aggression.” These outlooks translated well into the public conscience, where socialist

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101 Ibid.
102 Ibid.
103 Ibid.
105 Wells, Reshaping Man’s Heritage (BBC Home Service, 15 January 1943), from BBC Online Archive, 12min 10s, http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/hg_wells/12408.shtml.
sentiments continued to brew after the release of the Beveridge Report two months earlier.

“There has been a world of masters and men,” said Wells, “what the Israelis called two nations…There is no choice before mankind but a worldwide control of production and power.” A global organization that managed labor and output would once and for all conclude the ugly chapter of history built on the sweat of “unskilled workers and such like toilers.” New Britain would lead the charge in eliminating “the old social pyramid” as “mankind has no further use for serfs and slaves. The new world must be therefore an equal, egalitarian society.” The liberation of occupied Europe and founding of a new world order would complement the emancipation of the working classes from the burden of fueling competition between industrialized economies. As such, Reshaping Man’s Heritage strengthened leftist dreams in wartime Britain, particularly the desire to usher in socialist principles to sew a widening gap between classes. Just as Britain had acquired the television and wireless, so would Britain introduce universal egalitarianism, the “rehabilitation” of the world.

For Orwell, too, war provided a platform for egalitarian reform. The election of 1940 had resulted in the defeat of the old aristocracy, whose incompetence had left Hitler undeterred in pushing into Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. As Orwell exclaimed in The Lion and the Unicorn, “The mishandling of England’s domestic problems during the nineteen-twenties had been bad enough, but British foreign policy between 1931 and 1939 is one of the wonders of the world. Why? What had happened? What was it that at every decisive moment made every British do the wrong thing with so unerring an instinct?” He later concludes, “What is to be expected of them [the ruling class] is not treachery or physical cowardice, but stupidity, unconscious

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106 Ibid.
107 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
109 George Orwell, The Lion and the Unicorn, 37.
sabotage… They are not wicked, nor altogether wicked; they are merely unteachable.”  

The aristocracy, Orwell believed, represented the England of 1840, a class that was anachronistic and unequipped to direct a modern government, let alone orchestrate modern warfare. Gone were the days of top hats, tailcoats, and elitist parliamentary politics; now, the people were on the verge of political control. “If it can be made clear that defeating Hitler means wiping out class privilege, the great mass of middling people, the £6 a week to £2000 a year class, will probably be on our side.” The postwar era allowed for a reconfiguration of the British social order, one that removed from the nation gross financial inequities that had existed since early industrialization, from the England of 1840. Like the prophecies of Wells, Orwell’s future envisioned a transition of power from the old elites into the hands of the masses, for the benefit of the masses.

Socialism was the viable doctrine that allowed this shift to occur. To achieve an egalitarian Britain, Orwell believed that it was the people’s responsibility to foster mass enthusiasm and found the movement. These enthusiasts he considered modern, living in “vast new wildnesses of glass and brick [where] the sharp distinctions of the older kind of town, with its manor-houses and squalid cottages, no longer exist… To that civilization belong the people who are most at home and most definitely are of the modern world, the technicians and higher-paid skilled workers, the airmen and their mechanics, the radio experts, film producers, popular journalists and industrial chemists.” Although Orwell found that Britain had retained past traits that enforced contemporary class divisions, the patriotic unity generated by the war was also capable of rallying Britons to join the socialist cause, to transcend class difference. Like the war effort, socialism was a movement for the people, by the people. Moreover, the establishment

110 Ibid., 43-44.
111 Ibid., 97.
112 Ibid., 12.
113 Ibid., 54.
of an egalitarian future was at the heart of the fight against fascism. Orwell states, “Socialism aims, ultimately, at a world-state of free and equal human beings. It takes the equality of human rights for granted. Nazism assumes just the opposite. The driving force behind the Nazi movement is the belief in human inequality, the superiority of Germans to all other races, the right of Germany to rule the world.” In battling against inequality, then, Orwell argues that Britons were already fighting for egalitarianism. With encouragement, the people’s war would yield the people’s future. And yet, despite his assurance that this future was realistic and achievable, The Lion and the Unicorn – like the prophecies of Wells and the publication of the Beveridge Report – motivated the masses to view the war as an opportunity to add their voices to the conversation on planning, in some cases creating utopian expectations.

The 1941 alliance with the Soviet Union enabled these egalitarian dreams to develop, first strengthening British sympathies for their anti-fascist comrades of the east. A 1941-42 Mass Observation survey on attitudes to Russia revealed how this rapport had progressed. M45D found Russia “a damn fine country” and observed the sudden change in public sentiment, recalling how “before the war we through [sic] dust on them, as if they were a lot of heathens. Called them Bolshies and what not.” M45C furthered this, announcing it “a great pity that the Imperialistic bias against her was so prominent in the Tory Government before the War and if this had not existed and we had treated them as equals, as they deserved, this War most likely would never have happened.” With the alliance, official antagonisms had disappeared and the coalition began to emphasize wartime unity with the communists. As such, civilians found parallels between themselves and Soviet citizens. When Mass Observation showed M60B

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114 Ibid., 63.
116 Ibid.
photographs of soldiers in the Red Army, for example, he remarked, “They’re very like English people, those Russians. More like than either the Germans or the French.” F40D saw Russians as “a wonderful lot of people” and M55D even advocated that “the co-operation of our country with this [the Soviet government] in time of peace would be to the benefit of all of those whose ambition was lasting peace and goodwill.” Attitudes like these, underlining commonalities, warmth, or enduring accord, helped to foster pro-Soviet mindsets among some sectors of the population. Sympathy for Stalin and the Red Army brought attention to communist models of governance and social organization among Britons who saw the war as a chance for national revival.

Looking eastward for reconstruction carried planning schemes beyond the formalities of elite blueprints for the future. This phenomenon embodies the shift in the nature of planning, from top-down reconstruction proposals to those generated from the public. F25B stated, “I’d like to see things very much like Russia, with all class barriers down, free education for all, and equal chances for rich and poor.” F40D expressed a similar wish, stating, “I find their system of government is very good. Everybody has the same opportunity of rising to the top, and the working classes are not used as stepping-stones by those better off. We should have that system of government.” In this sense, misunderstandings of everyday life in the Soviet Union were characteristic of utopian planning, in which some Britons perceived Stalin’s regime as a prosperous, classless society, or a haven for the exploited worker. As the *Daily Worker* proclaimed as early as January 1940, the Red Army functioned as an “army of liberation” that,

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117 Ibid.
118 Ibid.
119 Ibid.
120 Ibid.
121 Ibid.
upon invasion of Belorussia and Western Ukraine, propelled 2,000 peasants and workers into the state apparatus and found jobs for 16,800 unemployed. As such, the Soviet Union seemed like a paradise for those who had suffered from a lack of security during the interwar years. F50D saw Russia as “an ideal country for the likes of us to live in. I wish we poor people were thought of the same here…In Russia I am told you are always provided for by giving you work or maintaining you decently – also when a worker is run down he is sent away to a rest-centre to regain his health.” Finally, the Soviet Union offered a model for egalitarianism beyond class difference. A housewife recalled how a friend believed “this country [Britain] should undergo a revolution and approximate to the Russian system – both husband and wife go out to work, and contribute equally to the upkeep of the home.” Restructuring Britain through a Soviet model did not merely free unskilled workers, but liberated women as well. These exaggerations of Soviet egalitarianism, however, undermined desires to adopt a communist model for postwar reconstruction.

Indeed, the alliance also produced both distrust of the USSR and criticism of its oppressive policies. This counterbalanced the movement to look eastward for reconstruction, but did not deter the hopes and expectations induced by the Beveridge Report. What distinguished Britain from the Soviet Socialist Republics, according to M65B, was force, which he called “the antithesis of liberty. Its [the USSR’s] industrial and social systems are equally based on the negation of individualism and individual liberty. The ‘freedom’ for which Red Russia fights is not the freedom which Britons cherish and fight for.” Such was the sentiment of others who expressed doubt about a lasting cooperation between the two powers. Not only was Soviet

122 Daily Worker, “Army of Liberty,” 5 January 1940.
authority flawed in using force and terror as the foundation for control, but Stalin was generally
deemed untrustworthy as an ally. M50B conceded that “one must give Russia their due as fine
soldiers and an heroic people…but they did not come in on our side until it suited their book.”

M60C agreed: “Don’t think the Russians are to be trusted. They are not fighting to help us but to
help themselves. If Germany invaded Britain, Russia would have invaded Germany and so
carried on their aim…of world domination.” Suspicions of Soviet motivations, and
perceptions of inherent, uncompromising differences between the countries, challenged dreams
for a communist future.

On the other hand, as Orwell suggested, Britain needed a reconstruction cocktail that fit
the nation’s political and cultural values. While *The Lion and the Unicorn* incentivized the public
add their voices to planning, Orwell highlighted the obligation of adopting a postwar model that
worked for the unique composition of British society: those “who hope to see it [Britain]
Russianized or Germanized will be disappointed. The gentleness, the hypocrisy, the
thoughtlessness, the reverence for law and the hatred of uniforms will remain, along with the
suet puddings and the misty skies.”

Neither a Russian nor a German prototype could resolve
British class discrepancies, because they did not take into account the existing conditions shaping
or inhibiting the potential for progress at home. According to Orwell, practical programs of
reform included the nationalization of major industries and ensuring equal opportunities in
education and employment. Socialism, Orwell affirmed, was not a utopian concept. It did not
require a bloodthirsty uprising against the propertied class, and, as Davison remarked following
the Beveridge Report, socialism “is far more likely to make the British into a nation of small

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126 Ibid.
127 Ibid.
128 George Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 55.
129 Ibid., 100-103.
capitalists rather than a propertyless socialist proletariat.” It provided securities and equal opportunity, what most Britons felt lacking during the interwar years. As RAF pilot, Reginald John Willis, reflected, “A strong Britain, a free Britain, a Britain with beautiful and happy homes, is a land which is not hard to visualize… I am convinced beyond all doubt that what the average fighting man wants more than anything else in the world today is a job at which he is happy, a good home, and freedom of thought, speech, and religion.” If the postwar world offered employment, better housing, and the continuity of democratic rights, the peace was worth the fight. It was attainable. Looking to the Soviet Union, Orwell found, was a distraction.

Finding inspiration from the postwar futures envisioned by popular authors like Wells and Orwell, the public heightened their hopes and expectations for a New Britain founded upon socialist principles. Increasing sympathy for the Red Army and warmth to the Soviet Union as a wartime ally generated a phase in planning that brought attention to communist prototypes for political and social organization. Looking to the east for reconstruction resulted in a utopian epoch of planning, in which some Britons perceived the Soviet Union as having achieved an egalitarian society that liberated unskilled workers from corrupt bosses and women from domestic confines. Notwithstanding, these planners received backlash from those who distrusted Stalin’s agenda and who emphasized the need to have practical expectations for the postwar period. As such, Orwell denounced these utopian dreamers, affirming that “another marked characteristic [of the left-wing intelligentsia] is the emotional shallowness of people who live in a world of ideas and have little contact with physical reality.” Britain needed a socialist reconstruction program that focused on the betterment of society through its existing political

132 Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 47.
and cultural framework, that originated from national traditions, that allowed Britain to still be Britain.

**Reconstruction Confirmed: Presenting “New Britain” at the 1951 South Bank Exhibition**

In May of 1951, the millionth visitor entered the South Bank Exhibition in London. Little did Betty Dark expect a crowd to suddenly congregate around her, exclaiming that she would be “Queen of the Festival for the day.” Handed a pristine Festival guide, the same copy presented to King George VI at the opening ceremony, officials escorted the visitor to the Royal Pavilion where she posed for photographs. After spending the day with her fiancé, she reflected upon her experience with BBC host G. Talbot. What stood out to her were the morning festivities surrounding her arrival, and the steak that she ordered for lunch. She explains, “Well I just took one look at this steak and thought well I’ll never eat all that. It was such a delicious looking steak. I’ll always remember the looking at it all my life.”

Like the Festival, the steak marked the departure of the war, of austerity, and the advent of a New Britain. It was lavish and resplendent. It was appetizing. It was an unforgettable moment of luxury that was, nevertheless, exceptional and – pardon the pun – rare in reality. For although the Festival sought to celebrate the achievement of constructing a better and more egalitarian nation, demonstrating the successes of postwar reconstruction and bringing the people’s peace, it remained a polished attraction rather than an authentic representation of postwar Britain. Being “one united act of national reassessment and one corporate reaffirmation

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133 Betty Dark, “Festival of Britain 1951: Impression of the South Bank Exhibition – The Millionth Visitor and Her Fiancé,” interview by G. Talbot (BBC Light Programme, May 26, 1951), from British Library Sound Archives, 1min. 41sec., B2485/1/27.
134 Ibid.
of faith in the nation’s future,” the Festival wanted to confirm that the people’s wartime expectations for the future had been enacted by the postwar Labour government. It was a show of continuity and of progress, where the South Bank Exhibition’s pavilions reflected a national, industrial revival, housing redevelopment, the implementation of the welfare state, and modern aesthetics. Exhibitions on industry revealed new employment opportunities, those on housing signified the reunion of the family, those on welfare reflected the postwar, egalitarian standard, and the overall appearance of the South Bank presented Britain as a flourishing, modern nation. The Festival, then, was the ultimate victory celebration, an affirmation of the end of war, of the triumphs of reconstruction, of the greater future realized. All the same, the South Bank was a glitzy utopia – delicious to digest, but offering only temporary satisfaction before returning to 1951 through the exhibition’s turnstiles.

While the South Bank Exhibition remained the most popular attraction of the Festival, the committee encouraged the planning of a nationwide celebration. It envisioned the Festival as “the work of not one city but of the whole nation.” As such, they organized a land traveling exhibition, featuring displays on industrial design, production, scientific discoveries, and the British home, which stopped in Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, and Nottingham. Consisting of over 3,000 objects, the exhibition accumulated to 35,000 square feet. Furthermore, the Festival ship, the HMS Campania, traveled up the east and west coasts, making appearances at ten major cities from Southampton to Dundee and Plymouth to Belfast and Glasgow. The committee moreover urged local governments to organize their own festivities, claiming that the Festival was an opportunity to reinvigorate provincial towns and villages from the war and austerity

137 Festival of Britain Office, *The Official Book of the Festival of Britain*, 62.
years. And yet, the South Bank Exhibition drew the largest crowds. A schoolmistress from Gloucester commented that she “would’ve liked a week to see it…and to have gone in and come out at leisure and rested my feet at intervals… There was much more than I thought there was going to be.”

Rather than undertaking a nationwide tour, the South Bank Exhibition allowed its eight million visitors to get the full Festival experience.

Indeed, the South Bank Exhibition remained the heart of the Festival, despite statements to the contrary. Even though the guide reminds, “With our conception of a national autobiography… the capital city of the kingdom and the Commonwealth cannot show the rich diversity of the British genius,” London represented the nation as a whole. Halls and pavilions addressed the British people, not the English, the Scots, the Welsh, or the Irish. They called attention to industrial, political, and cultural developments that came from all areas of the British Isles. In this way, the South Bank was able to affirm a nationwide revival and a continuous cultural ascendancy. The inclusion of the monarchy into the Festival program helped to promote these ideas, where “the national character of the Festival was confirmed by the patronage and involvement of the Royal Family at every stage from an address by Princess Elizabeth at the Royal Society of Arts as early as May 1948 and the official opening at St Paul’s Cathedral on 3 May 1951, to the closing of the South Bank Exhibition at the end of September.” The South Bank Exhibition celebrated British culture, British industry, and of utmost importance, Britons themselves. It then embodied what the Archbishop of Canterbury highlighted of the Festival in July 1950, namely “our belief and trust in the British way of life… with sober and humble trust

139 Festival of Britain Office, The Official Book of the Festival of Britain, 21.
that by holding fast to that which is good and rejecting from our midst that which is evil we may continue to be a nation at unity in itself and of service to the world.”\textsuperscript{141} The South Bank Exhibition was illustrative of New Britain, and of the people’s faith and connection to this future, this victory, now ostensibly achieved.

The upstream circuit presented industrial revival and fortitude, confirming the successes of reconstruction in expanding employment opportunities and prosperity. Whereas the downstream pavilions focused on British cultural traditions and modern life, upstream pavilions emphasized development in agriculture and farming, and mining to produce metals, wood, rubber, plastics, pottery, glass, textiles, and food. The upstream circuit also included a pavilion on maritime power, stressing that “Britain builds more ships and a greater variety of them than any other nation,” along with transportation pavilion with displays on roads, railways, airplanes, and telecommunication.\textsuperscript{142} The Council of Industrial Design covered all bases while carefully selecting items worthy of show. Here, each pavilion needed to express the important contributions of a particular industry to British “civilization” while exhibiting the boom of the industry itself. The council stated that “a subjected quantifying for inclusion must be one in which the British contribution is outstanding – such an invention like penicillin or the jet engine; an unrivalled British craft like tailoring or fine china; a current national enterprise like the equipment of new schools” et cetera. In presenting a particular achievement of British industry, the council exhibited an industry’s supposed postwar vitality. This suggested that reconstruction had offered

A solution...in the replanning of the distribution of industry so that new and profitable work is brought to where the people live. The heavy industries must stay tied to the locality of one, at least, of their raw materials. The lighter industries, however, can be located near the great centres of our population, and this is the principle of the planned

\textsuperscript{141} Festival of Britain Office, \textit{The Official Book of the Festival of Britain}, 1.

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid. 8.
development in operation today. These lighter industries, being very varied, can be balanced so that useful work is there for all sections of the population.143

According to the upstream circuit, citizens had access to employment to contribute to New Britain while enjoying job security and increased wealth. Reconstruction had brought employment to them.

Furthermore, the Homes and Gardens Pavilion of the downstream circuit illustrated that housing redevelopment had bandaged the aftermath of the Blitz. Along these lines, the Festival encouraged a “national spring-cleaning, for planting window boxes, flower baskets and temporary gardens, for painting the street lamps, decorating the streets and floodlighting buildings.”144 Victorian tenements faced the wrecking ball, and in their place would arise fresh housing projects and sleek apartment complexes. The 24,000 square feet of the Homes and Gardens Pavilion made this clear, filling the exhibition with blueprints and model rooms of contemporary yet comfortable dwellings in New Britain.145 Featuring bedrooms and playrooms for children, a farmer’s workshop, a lady’s garden, eight parlor configurations, and revolutionary strategies for maximizing spatial efficiency in the kitchen, Homes and Gardens projected that the government had fulfilled wartime expectations for better housing.146 It brought the family together again, exhibiting rooms for all members of the household no longer separated or distracted by the war effort. Homes and Gardens marked a nationwide revival that benefited all, highlighting the egalitarian nature of reconstruction, in which

Houses, cottages and clubs have been built for old age pensioners. Playing fields and sporting grounds have been made or improved. There are places where 1951 will see laid the foundation stone of the new Town Hall or where a new park will be opened for the first time. Buildings of historical importance or architectural beauty have been restored…

144 Festival of Britain Office, The Official Book of the Festival of Britain, 64-65.
145 Festival of Britain Office and the Council of Industrial Design, Notes for Industry, 17.
146 For a full list of model rooms and related items on display inside the Homes and Gardens Pavilion, see Catalogue of Exhibits for the South Bank Exhibition (London 1951), 123-150.
Parish councils have provided seats for the village green or by the bus stops, they have improved the public lighting or the children’s playground, repaired footpaths or the gates and fences in the recreation ground, gardens have been planted, avenues of trees, or rose trees in the church yard.147

Redevelopment in housing and town planning accounted for the family, children, the elderly, and even those who cherished the remaining traces of medieval British architecture. New Britain razed the physical remnants of the Blitz, preserved beloved, historical sites, and rejuvenated provincial and urban landscapes to increase living standards for residents and reunited families.

Reconstruction, the Festival showed, was a spectacle. Visitors to London could witness the full renovation of Poplar, an east end area severely damaged by the Blitz. This “live” architectural exhibition consisted of a model town in the process of being built, whose homes would be put on the market after the Festival.148 Poplar was the epitome of the Festival’s “cleaning-up scheme,” exhibiting “the best that current British architecture, town planning, and building technique have to offer,” an answer to the postwar housing crisis.149 Hopes for improved living standards were answered with slum clearance and the increasing availability of homes for a new generation of Britons. For what visitors saw in Poplar was an example of “the future London which is to arise from blitzed ruins and from the slums and chaotic planning of the past.”150 In this sense, Poplar shared a new standard for accommodation, offering a model for redevelopment and expectations.

As such, Festival guides highlighted other areas being repaired from the Blitz. The “derelict and bomb-scarred wilderness” of Lansbury, for instance, had been transformed into “a new urban landscape in which the buildings are growing together as a community.”151

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149 Ibid., 7.
151 Ibid., 13.
Liverpool, town planning had become ceremonial, where there occurred a “procession...on the last evening of the Festival...crowned by the chimes of midnight. As the bells ring out over the city and the river, giant bulldozers will make their first assault upon a section of Liverpool’s central blitzed area, giving reality to the ceremony’s theme: ‘Resurgence’ and declaring the city’s faith in the future.”

Reconstruction was a nationwide success that united Britons and helped to erase the imprint of the Blitz.

Next came two pavilions on education and health. Here, “The New Schools” exhibited the revamping of nurseries, primary and secondary schools, and universities through displays of new school supplies and “specialist equipment for laboratories, craftrooms and workshops.”

Equal opportunities in education, the pavilion showed, had enabled the development of better schools, where students received more care in updated, modern learning environments. Such was the underlying theme in the health pavilion as well, which stressed that socialized healthcare still recognized “the importance of the individual in the community...for Britain leads the world in the individual attention given to the sick.”

Although the welfare state now provided healthcare to all citizens, Britain continued to pride itself on maintaining patients’ privacy and attending to their needs on a one-to-one basis. The pavilion also portrayed how healthcare reform had modernized medicine. Items on display included a “modern electric apparatus for psychological experiments,” a “sluice control gear for catchment areas,” and “mass radiography equipment.”

These novel instruments represented innovation in British medicine, and showed how reform had benefited all Britons after the war.

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152 Ibid., 51.
153 Festival of Britain Office and the Council of Industrial Design, Notes for Industry, 18.
154 Ibid., 18.
155 Ibid., 18.
The architecture of the South Bank Exhibition also reflected the arrival of New Britain, a society founded on modern aesthetics and appearances. No longer was “everyday life… drab and grey,” but fashionable and sleek. Indeed, the construction of all pavilions utilized “modern” materials like steel, concrete, asbestos, glass, and aluminum. Alongside the monstrous Dome of Discovery, constructed with these materials, stood impressive structures like the Shot Tower and the Skylon, the former deemed a “London landmark.” Although constructed in 1826 using brick, the Festival Council saw it converted into a radio tower, with an antenna placed on top thirty-foot in diameter. This transformation, then, reflected a Festival initiative to repurpose old buildings for modern purposes. The Skylon, moreover, was a needle-like, steel structure suspended in the air at nearly three-hundred-feet high. Although visitors could not do anything but simply look at the Skylon, one ten-year-old boy commented that it was the best part of the South Bank. Similar to Betty Dark’s bewilderment with her steak, the boy stated, “The only thing I did like was the Skylon… I’ve never seen anything so nice in all my life.” These key features of the South Bank Exhibition thus conveyed that modernity had renovated the dreary and monotonous appearance of prewar Britain in favor of a more sophisticated, stylish, and stimulating update. Hugh Casson, the director of architecture at the site, found that the South Bank had been transformed into “a new world.”

158 Ibid., 19.
159 Ibid., 18. Visitors could even control the antenna from the Dome of Discovery.
161 Unidentified speaker, “Festival of Britain 1951: Impression of the South Bank Exhibition” (BBC Home Service, June 15, 1951), from British Library Sound Archives, 18sec., B2485/1/11.
162 Hugh Maxwell Casson, “South Bank Adventure” (May 8, 1951), from British Library Sound Archives, B2485/1/11.
All the same, this new world existed only within the twenty-seven acres of the South Bank Exhibition and in its periphery displays. Although reconstruction had opened more employment opportunities, had orchestrated housing redevelopment, and had brought education, healthcare, and aesthetic reform, the portrayal of postwar Britain on the South Bank exaggerated the successes of the Labour government with national recovery. Reconstruction was not a glamorous process complete with steaks and Skylons. As such, the South Bank failed to convey the difficulties Britons had faced following the Second World War under austerity, in an attempt to show how wartime expectations and hopes for New Britain had been satisfied with relative ease. Here, an underlying purpose of the Festival as a whole was to demonstrate how socialist reconstruction had produced the better, egalitarian future envisioned during the war, in order to generate hope for the nation’s future. In its overreach, the South Bank Exhibition remained an unconvincing representation of the postwar nation and “like all great fêtes in history…it solved nothing, but, for a brief, fleeting moment, it presented a mirage of hope.”

PART II

Confronting Reality in Postwar Britain

While the 1945 General Election slated the Labour Party as the emissary to deliver this comfortable, congruous future, austerity measures lasted well into the late 1940s and early 1950. Meager rations of meat, bread, clothing, and fuel, unemployment, taxes, and the looming costs of reconstruction drained faith for an egalitarian recovery. Although Let Us Face the Future, the Labour programme that announced the purpose and aspirations of the party if elected into the majority, outlined that “the Labour Party makes no baseless promises. The future will not be easy” and that “socialism cannot come overnight, as the product of a week-end revolution,” unachievable ideals of wartime planning nevertheless contributed to the party’s overwhelming victory.164 Geoffrey Field connects this unprecedented shift in the direction of domestic politics to a wartime “intensification of patriotism [that] coincided with a growing assertion of working-class identity and solidarity,” what he calls “popular, left-wing ‘social patriotism.’”165 Austerity, however, posed familiar challenges to the lower classes, and provided a platform upon which to react and showcase discontentment. The postwar “plan which will win the Peace for the People” (or perceived lack thereof) deflated support for Labour and lessened faith in the possibilities of reconstruction.166

Even so, the socialist government had installed widespread economic and social reforms by the time of the Festival of Britain. The immediate postwar years ushered in a series of

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parliamentary acts passed under the Labour majority that sought to assure equal opportunity and gradually provide the remodeled, improved future that had energized the masses during the Second World War. The New Towns Act in 1946, later supported by the Town and Country Planning Act in 1947 and the Countryside Act in 1949, ensured an equitable reevaluation of land for living purposes, along with a redevelopment of suburban and rural areas that either had fallen into disrepair or had been damaged by German bombs. Nationalization of industries, from transportation and electricity to coal, gas, iron and steel, eliminated competition (in theory) and protected jobs for working class citizens. Finally, the National Insurance Act, National Assistance Act, and National Health Service Act, all established in 1946, founded the British welfare state by expanding social security and national insurance, and providing free medical care to the public and redistributing of doctors in twenty hospital groups throughout the nation. By the end of 1948, 97% of Britons were under the NHS. These reforms prompted Herbert Morrison to exclaim that “the government had achieved ‘the most extensive and significant legislative programme in the history of our great Parliament.’” Although Attlee faced momentous challenges during his premiership, like a fuel crisis in the winter of 1946-47, sterling crisis in the summer of 1947, decolonization in India in 1947, Burma and Palestine in 1948, and the disastrous collapse of the East African groundnut scheme in early 1951,

168 Ibid., 53.
169 Ibid., 61-63.
170 Ibid., 4.
171 Herbert Morrison as quoted in Jarman, Socialism in Britain, 170.
Morrison’s conclusion betrays little hyperbole. From the top, it appeared that the socialists had put the future in order.

The Festival of Britain, then, was a celebration of the successes of the postwar government, a reminder that the promises that the socialists had made during the war had, after all, been fulfilled. New Britain had arrived and replaced the old, aristocratic order. The interwar years were nothing but a past, albeit haunting, memory of depression and Chamberlain’s naiveté. Achieving “cradle to grave security” and managing to “sugar the pill of nationalization” were causes to rejoice. Through the festival, British culture, too, would be accessible to the people. As Becky Conekin affirms, the event became Labour’s “social democratic project,” a chance to showcase postwar development and progress before the polls opened — despite repeated confirmations from Barry and Morrison that the Festival was apolitical. Nonetheless, although the government had achieved an astonishing volume of reforms, Bartlett reminds that “the really creative or innovatory period of the Attlee ministries came to an end in 1947. Thereafter there was some filling in of the details, but in the main they were preoccupied with running a nation and an empire in the conditions of a deepening cold war and of a hesitant British economic recovery.” Not even socialist reconstruction could subvert “the peacetime evils of unemployment, poverty, and malnutrition.” Here, the Festival of

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176 Bartlett, A History of Postwar Britain, 64.
177 Jarman, Socialism in Britain, 164.
Britain was an opportunity to speak to the masses, where disillusionment could be checked and class tensions quelled.

**Early Tests to New Britain: The October 1945 Dockers’ Strike and Postwar Unrest**

In early October 1945, workers from the London docklands launched a national strike in opposition to their static wages. Extending from the south to Liverpool and Glasgow, and touching other midland coastal regions, the strike challenged the credibility of Labour’s promises for postwar economic recovery and social reform — what had slated the party for victory in the election that previous summer. Mass Observation records that this “Dockers’ Strike” was the first significant strike which occurred in the postwar period due to its sheer scale, as the strike not only covered an impressive area but received widespread media coverage and public attention.178 While the fixedness of wages (which had not increased since 1937) undoubtedly triggered the retaliation, along with poor working conditions, the end of the Lend-Lease Agreement, and thus lessened opportunities for work, the Dockers’ Strike exhibited an almost instantaneous, working-class disillusionment with the ability to realize wartime hopes and expectations.179 This pessimism reflected the declining faith in the idea that an egalitarian nation could emerge from the ashes of world war. And so, even though the Dockers’ Strike resulted from predictable frustrations with an unrecovered economy, the strike exposed an age-old social fragmentation that the “collective” war effort failed to mask through a myth of classlessness. Without war, without the repression of this tension, the strike empowered a ruthless confrontation between unskilled laborers and their detractors that destabilized the peace and questioned the feasibility of Labour’s agenda in Austerity Britain.

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179 Ibid.
Personal testimonies collected by Mass Observation that October provide complexity to the disadvantages that dockworkers faced after victory. Supporters of the strike — whether docker, family member or unaffiliated, unskilled worker — were low income individuals who had minimum standards of living and wanted their financial burdens to be lifted in the frugal postwar environment. Here, the protest highlighted the inconsistency of pay between unskilled industries and general inequity when having to support a large family. M55D echoed what Mass Observation had found while comparing prewar and postwar wages, stating, “All the other trades got a war bonus, yet we didn’t. We’re getting the same rate as in 1937, and now with fewer boats coming in we’re being cut down in our wage packets and feeling the difference.”\(^{180}\) A sixty-year-old docker shared this frustration, calling the strike “pathetic…we’ve only done so because ever since 1937 our demands have been consistently refused. During the war we’ve worked till 10 o’clock Sundays included and there’s never a boat left at these docks without being properly loaded.”\(^{181}\) As the wartime economy decelerated, so did the intensity of trade at the docks that had provided workers with more opportunities for work rather than any true increase in pay. This fixedness (what a docker called “a slave standard of living”) impacted more than the individual worker, as wages also supported households and families.\(^{182}\) The wife of a docker, aged thirty-three and with eight children, reflected, “The works’ very hard — nobody but a dockie’s wife knows how tired the men are after a day’s work. The most my chap’s earned is £7 a week, but on average it’s about £5, and when there’s no work the pool money is £3.42d a week, and what with the rent and food and clothing you can just about keep them clean and pay for the bit of food.”\(^{183}\) This example suggests that uncertainty in the immediate postwar months about work opportunity

\(^{180}\) Ibid.
\(^{181}\) Ibid.
\(^{182}\) Ibid.
\(^{183}\) Ibid.
and salary promised no concrete foundation upon which a lower income household could ensure financial security. M60D asked, “What a heart, I ask you, has a man got to bring up a family, never knowing when he goes in to work if there’ll be any for him?” These grievances pushed workers to express their indignation in response to the unstable and unreliable working conditions at the docks. This turbulence, which the wartime economic boom had quelled, would expose a postwar fracture in class relations and therefore challenge the government’s attempts to deliver reconstruction and egalitarianism in postwar Britain.

Dissatisfaction with Labour emerged, however, regardless of social class. Either austerity had worsened the postwar economy, failing to produce low unemployment, adequate wages and industrial revival, or these measures had allowed the strike to occur, resulting in a loss of food products that immorally affected the nation during a period of strict rationing. While one upper-class woman commented that she found the strike “disgraceful… the workers themselves are hampering the Labour government,” another stated, “it’s very unfair — the dockies have had more than their share this war. They’ve got a Labour government and then they do this. No, it’s very wrong.” Dockers received the blame for the government’s inability to initiate a successful and expedited reconstruction program. And yet, so too did Labour receive criticism on their inability to answer the strike while beginning necessary reforms to end austerity. As the dockers refused to work, war veterans were installed to unpack and reload ships at the London docks, making the incendiary Socialist Appeal declare, “What a disgrace it is that a Labour Government should force the troops to strike-break! The Labour Government understood that to give the dockers concessions would start a snowball running down a hill. The demands of the dockers can

184 Ibid.
185 Ibid.
only be met at the expense of the capitalists.”¹⁸⁶ Labour, the Socialist Appeal often expressed, allied itself with the capitalists — the corporations, the manufacturers, the industrialists — who subjugated and exploited working-class Britain. That fall, faith had dwindled across the socioeconomic levels.

Condemnation did not end here, as the strike kindled anxieties about the availability of food rations being imported. Although the Minister of Food, Sir Benjamin Smith, confirmed that the strike would not affect the food supply nor decrease allowances per individual or family, his reassurances were ignored.¹⁸⁷ Those interviewed by Mass Observation correlated inactivity at the docks to the likelihood of diminishing stocks at the grocers or supermarkets. One young woman interviewed near Battersea Park affirmed, “It’s very selfish, I should say, making everyone suffer instead of waiting a bit longer…It’s the food is going to be the worry. It’s disgusting, when we’re so short of everything. I hope they’ll settle it soon.”¹⁸⁸ Another voiced a similar thought, calling the strike “wickedness, downright wickedness; all the war getting more in one day than our boys got in one week, and they draw their three or four pounds a week just for walking about doing nothing. People can’t stand that, you know; not after six years of war — people are in a poor way of health and if we don’t get our bite of rations wherever shall we be?”¹⁸⁹ Even though one working-class man stated that “if some of the public saw some of the stuff that had come in during the last three months they’d know we were all right for rations — loads [original emphasis] of meat” and the Socialist Appeal reported that the food left unpacked included dried eggs, bags of starch, and “meat frozen stiff as logs,” the primary reason to denounce the strike remained that dockers were unprincipled and mercenary, sacrificing the nation for a wage

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.
¹⁸⁹ Ibid.
In reality, rising food prices did pose a threat to working-class livelihood; however, the malcontent which resulted from austerity, on both the left and right, originated from Labour policies which promised a progressive period of reconstruction. Displeasure with the strike revealed a vexation amongst the higher classes, with the government unable to appease the obnoxious and inconvenient tirades of the working class.

Tensions continued to build in the press, which either backed the docker cause while blaming capitalist greed or propagated fears of rations being threatened, and the nation’s food supply. The October 12 edition of the *Daily Express*, for example, boasted a headline which proclaimed “Bacon for Troops Cut: Rations Menaced” in all capitals. Similar headlines came from the *Daily Mail*, one being “Forgotten Food Is Rotting in Two School Dumps,” that correlated the effects of the strike to innocent, middle-class children and families being forced to eat rotten food. The Labour government, moreover, supported these stories and officially denounced the strike, a signal that the party had begun “moving away from its working-class image. Attlee had been educated at Haileybury and Oxford — though he looked like Lenin and, as far as practical results went, was the best socialist of the lot.” Although Labour remained committed to socialist legislation throughout the late 1940s, strikes challenged its promises of progress and recovery. On the other hand, left-leaning papers like the *Socialist Appeal* berated the press for “misrepresenting the dockers’ case” and “whipping up public opinion against the dockers’ fight for a living wage.” One edition featured cartoons of Hitler as a trade union boss and Churchill, who the *Socialist Appeal* called a “baby starver,” as a manufacturer. And while

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192 Ibid.
the dockers protested and refused to work under some conditions, nevertheless “dockers in every port have offered to unload perishable foodstuffs, cigarettes and Christmas parcels, Red Cross equipment, free and without receiving one penny for it.” This polarization and competition to monopolize the truth presented a broken and divided image of postwar Britain.

Indeed, upper-class criticisms amounted to accusations of blackmail and tyranny. One housewife had a friend who “suggested it was a pity they couldn’t experience a strike of the public services [themselves]; have their electricity and gas and water turned off — then they’d have a little more understanding of what that sort of thing means — blackmailing the whole community.” Similarly, F30B stated that “everybody at the office was saying it was a pity that the gas and electricity and water supply couldn’t be cut off from the dockers’ homes; then they’d realize what a blackmailing weapon was. I don’t think they’ve got any public sympathy at all.” The dockers, in this case, become traitors to the nation, an undisciplined, self-serving group that devalues and corrupts a hard-won victory and resulting peace. As another affirmed, “They’re making the whole country suffer. They’ve made good money out of the war…but no, it’s all gone on beer and cigarettes. No, I’m not in favour of them myself; a worthless good-for-nothing class of men, the lowest of the low, the scum of the earth. But maybe you’ll not get another to tell you so much of the truth.” While an extremity, this latter opinion paints the dockers and the working class as unpatriotic and even unhuman, like leeches that do nothing but drain Britain of its potential and purity. Together, these comments show a willingness to disassociate and detach from a lower class and its grievances. In threatening the nation, in being tyrants, the dockers were not representative nor deserving of a better, sophisticated, and modern Britain.

198 Ibid.
199 Ibid.
As such, the strike hindered the coming of New Britain. The strike exposed the unhappiness and exasperation of a fatigued working class and an uncompromising public, and the new norm of postwar austerity. Rationing was a national grievance, transformed into an anxiety when under threat. In this sense, the Dockers’ Strike revealed the fragility of postwar Britain, quite the contrary to an envisioned promised land of peace and prosperity. Britain continued to rely on American aid and imported basic necessities, challenging the proud independence of a nation who, four years previously, had faced Nazi Germany “alone.”

Wartime conditions had followed the people into peace and generated disillusionment and unrest. As Jarman observes, “In wartime a government can do things it cannot do in peacetime, and… in wartime people will work harder, accept burdens, and put up with rationing and controls.” The strike marked the continuity of class tensions, in which each pole discarded the other’s humanity and value to the nation. As one working-class man explained, “I’m not a dockie myself, but that’s what the trouble was. It seemed as if the men were forgotten.” Workers were essential parts of the war machine, yet invisible in the factories — parts appreciated if they ran well and did not break down. These class tensions thus cast ambiguity over a future that the government had planned and the people anticipated. As F35D commented, “Well, I can manage this week, but what bothers me is what’s going to happen next week?” Uncertainty about the future emerged after the peace, not a nationwide faith in egalitarian progress.

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200 See David Edgerton, “Never Alone,” in Britain’s War Machine: Weapons, Resources, and Experts in the Second World War (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 47-85. He underlines a key problem of this aspect of the myth. Despite Britain not having an European ally after the Fall of France (1940), they did have the support of the Commonwealth, which greatly contributed to the war machine.

201 Jarman, Socialism in Britain, 165.


203 Ibid.
New Britain Assessed at the 1946 Britain Can Make It Exhibition

September 1946. London’s Victoria & Albert Museum, a distinguished nucleus of world art and design, opened its doors to a new exhibition, narrowly entitled Britain Can Make It.204

Sponsored by the Council of Industrial Design and built upon the labors of specialized sub-committees on industry and manufacturing, the exhibition was a showcase of artisan goods and commodities that had yet to reach mass production lines for postwar consumers. Visitors entered the museum from Exhibition Road, and waited in a queue (which sometimes extended out onto Exhibition Road) before gaining access to the domestic wonderland. Once inside, the exhibition led visitors through a sequence of thirty-five themed rooms, ranging from furnished bathrooms and power appliances to packaging and designs of the future. That October, a Mass Observation report found that nine out of every ten people interviewed in “Britain” had heard of the exhibition in South Kensington, at least in the area between Portsmouth and Manchester. 33% of the sample had heard through newspapers, 25% through advertisement, and the remaining half through sources like the BBC or even the cinema.205 Why unleash a mass-marketing campaign for an exhibition on industrial design? What were the explicit and perhaps implicit rationales driving the Council of Industrial Design’s efforts to organize the exhibition?

The reported purpose of Britain Can Make It, as advertised by the Council of Industrial Design, was to affirm industrial continuity and potential in postwar Britain. Britain Can Make It was intended to offer evidence of postwar reconstruction’s successes and confirmation that the nation had emerged from the adversity of world war without having lost prewar industrial capability. As Sir Stafford Cripps, President of the Council’s Board of Trade, put it in the

204 It is ironic that the Victoria & Albert Museum, known for exhibitions on world cultures and art, agreed to host an exhibition solely on national industrial design.
Council’s survey of the exhibition, *Design ’46*, “After the trials and dislocations of the greatest war in the world’s history, people are anxious to know how British industry has fared so far as concerns goods for civilian use… This exhibition gives the answer and shows that despite our losses we have not lost that tradition of good design which has made British industries famous in the past.”

Cripps argues that *Britain Can Make It* not only proves the continuity of industrial leadership and economic stability in Britain after 1945, but that the exhibition marks the beginning of an advancement in British technology and design. The Chair of the Council, S.C. Leslie, echoed Cripps in his report in *Design ’46*. The exhibition was, he noted, “an act of national policy of first class importance,” and “an opportunity of showing to the people at home and the world at large that Britain can make it…of advancing the cause of good design on all fronts at once.”

While promoting the tradition of quality in design and craftsmanship, *Britain Can Make It* would celebrate the bulletproof forces behind British industry, both the machines and manpower, which brought the nation through the Second World War to the promising dawn of the postwar era.

Indeed, *Britain Can Make It* attempted to present the human behind the product, in this case the designer and the manufacturer, to forge a persuasive, meaningful bond between industrialist and consumer. This goal faltered. As visitors wandered through the exhibition, they contributed their opinions on the displayed products by ranking them based upon their efficiency, appearance, and material. Visitors’ responses were placed in slots called “quiz stalls,” where they would be judged in comparison to assessments made by what Mass Observation labeled

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“experts” in product design. The exhibition gave agency to the consumer, where progress in industrial design depended on their evaluations on a product’s aesthetic and practicality. As the *Britain Can Make It* guide declared, “The manufacturer wants your opinion. If you ask for good designs, he will be at pains to provide them. The future of British design rests, in the long run, with you.” This message hardly resonated among the audience, unfortunately. Mass Observation reports, through interviews conducted on-site, that visitors were concerned with whether the product would aesthetically fit in their home or lifestyle, and little else. “There is, in other words, a strong desire amongst almost everybody to have in their ideal home what they have seen in the course of their visit. As will be later shown, far fewer expect that they will ever have these things, but none the less they are potential buyers within the limits of their pockets.” Visitors came to *Britain Can Make It* to be consumers, to idealize and to dream — not to admire manufacturing processes, technicalities of design, nor the craftsmen and industrialists behind the products on display. While the intended outcome behind the exhibition would have reflected an increased public appreciation for these operations and their engineers, along with a reassurance of postwar preeminence in industrial development, the Council of Industrial Design and the V&A Museum merely endorsed a ceremonial opportunity for window shopping.

Just as the exhibition propagated unachievable ideals in home decor and lifestyle goods, *Britain Can Make It* presented an all too rosy portrait of consumers in postwar Britain, and their dwelling spaces — an image exemplified by the catalogue of products in the furnished rooms. For instance, while rooms were decorated within the means of the occupant’s purchasing power,

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they exhibited idealized images of each social class and their living spaces. Here, the most popular and highly praised room was “the kitchen of a cottage of a modern mining village,” designed by Edna Mosely. On display were white glazed wall tiles, inlaid linoleum, a metal window, gas-heated wash boiler, gas refrigerator and gas cooker, among other goods that signified a comfortable and kitsch, working-class home environment. This differed considerably from the presentation of “a kitchen with dining recess in a small modern house,” designed by Frederick MacManus. Instead of gas appliances, this kitchen boasted an electric refrigerator, electric cooker, and an electric space heater, complemented by a porcelain steel sink and drainer, wooden windows, “Sutherland Rose” curtains, and hand-printed wallpaper, “single print white star on grey ground, traditional Victorian design.” This was only the beginning, as the exhibition had on display a third “kitchen in a large, well-appointed house.” And even more revealing of socioeconomic contrasts were the bathrooms on display. H. Taylor and David Green adorned their middle-class bathroom with plastic sheeting on the walls and door, linoleum, fluorescent lighting, a toilet with a black plastic seat (product name “Comfort”), and an aluminum window. On the contrary, “a luxury bathroom” contained “bronze-sprayed, sand-blasted, fluted” glass, a white terrazzo floor, a porcelain bath, a “chromium-plated, pedestal lavatory basin,” a white bidet, and two lamps mounted on the wall, labeled “Electric Sun.” The discrepancies between social classes could not have been more obvious or intentional within the furnished rooms, then, as Britain Can Make It categorized each room and its affiliated products by quality in relation to the expected occupant’s socioeconomic status.

210 Council of Industrial Design, Britain Can Make It Exhibition Guide, 119-120.
211 Ibid., 119-120.
212 Ibid., 120-121.
213 Ibid., 128.
214 Ibid., 122-123.
215 Ibid., 123-124.
The exhibition, however, never painted these differences as divisions, per se, but rather as necessary, functional parts which made up a harmonious whole, the nation. Although the Council of Industrial Design developed and showcased these model rooms for occupants based on their socioeconomic status, the exhibition would nevertheless contribute to a false understanding of contentment within and between social classes in postwar Britain. The *Britain Can Make It* Exhibition Catalogue demonstrated this problematic approach by including illustrations of the people who would live in these spaces — families, couples or single occupants next to the lists of products in each furnished room. The familial paragon of the mining village kitchen featured a family composed of the “coal miner, middle aged, active trade unionist, member of colliery choir. His wife, a member of Women’s Institute; their three children.” The wife sits on an old chair cradling a baby, while the father admires his eldest son, not quite a teenager, who makes funny faces at the baby. His younger sister holds onto her father’s waistband while reaching down to pet a black kitten pawing at her leg. Husband and wife are smiling. All members are modestly dressed, with the wife wearing an apron. The catalogue follows — and perhaps unintentionally contrasts — this idealized working-class family, in their quaint, adequate life with the family found within “a kitchen in a large, well-appointed house,” designed by Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew. Here the catalogue presented the “managing director of an engineering works; university education. His wife; lived in America for some years. Their daughter, now at boarding school. Their staff; two maids and a manservant.” A little black poodle wags its tail in front of the crowd, the butler hands the patriarch a telephone, and his wife converses with a maid, wearing an elaborate hat. In the background hangs a portrait with a gilded frame that

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216 Ibid., 119.
217 Ibid., 128.
218 Ibid., 128.
matches an elegant table resting beneath. Other furnished rooms showcase similarly satisfied Britons. The “kitchen within dining recess in a small, modern house” features an architect, his wife, and son.\textsuperscript{219} The “bedroom in a small house in an industrial town” features the family of a railway engineer and ex-soldier, the housewife and their five children.\textsuperscript{220} Urban environments generally promote singles or young couples living in townhouses or flats. Most importantly, each illustration depicts the occupant(s) as content, happy in their own environment and undisturbed by financial disparities. Together, these quintessential Britons form the postwar nation, a place of cooperation and consonance.

All the same, the location and idea of consumption behind \textit{Britain Can Make It} limited the extent to which the exhibition represented an egalitarian Britain. First, it was restrictive in being held at the V&A. While nine out of ten Britons had heard of the exhibition, Mass Observation concludes that approximately two out of five attendees lived in London, with a quarter more visitors coming from within 25 miles of the city.\textsuperscript{221} Thus, “attendance falls steadily with distance especially among the less well off.”\textsuperscript{222} Those who could afford travel costs, or who were already planning a trip to London, were able to see the exhibition, while those who did not have the budget for long-distance travel or the luxury of holidays did not. Moreover, Mass Observation states that visitors had more interest in idealizing the displayed products in their own homes or lifestyles than learning about the process of industrial design and manufacturing, let alone paying appreciation to the manufacturers and craftsmen themselves. “What most people want to see in the Exhibition,” the report reveals, “tallies closely with what they most want to

\textsuperscript{219} Ibid., 120. \\
\textsuperscript{220} Ibid., 129. \\
\textsuperscript{221} Mass Observation File Report SxMOA/1/2/26/1/A, ‘Britain Can Make It Exhibition,’ September 1946. \\
\textsuperscript{222} Ibid.
buy… despite general knowledge that the items are not for sale.”

Attending the exhibition with the sole intention of buying suggests that a majority of visitors had money to spend or, if they did not, fantasized about a life that they did not have. In this sense, although the exhibition displayed varying qualities of products that acknowledged a range of what visitors could afford, it created a distinction between those who did and those who did not have the luxury to purchase new items. *Britain Can Make It* seemingly became an exhibition for a group of people who could afford to indulge in their aesthetic desires and in modern living.

Despite these poignant admissions of a class structure, an idyllic social harmony sweetened *Britain Can Make It* and cast postwar Britain as progressive and egalitarian. S.C. Leslie, Director of the Council of Industrial Design, exclaimed in *Design ’46*:

Eighteenth-century society...was aristocratic while ours is to an increasing extent democratic...Today, the manufacturer and designer are confronted by what Mr. Churchill once called the rich variety of our island life (to say nothing of the even more varied tastes and needs of an Empire and world.) Never was demand more widely effective than in a society like ours today — never did so many different social and economic groups constitute a market for the designer and his products.

Industrial innovation and the ability to purchase modern products and new fashions was a postwar reality for all, Leslie suggests, regardless of social class. Here, an egalitarian consumerism formed a very real present enabled by workers in industrial design and in industry itself. Christian Barman, on the subcommittee for transportation, followed this logic in *Design ’46* as well.

To understand this quality [in British transport], it is necessary to consider its relation to the modern development of social equality in Great Britain. Social equality is far from being an exclusive possession of the British; indeed, its presence is probably more conspicuous in some of the smaller democracies of Western Europe than it is in the British Isles. What is peculiar to Great Britain is not so much the fact of equality as the

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223 Ibid.
common desire of the British people to achieve as quickly as possible equality for all at the highest level of physical well being. This physical well-being is seen not as a reward for exceptional exertions but as the rightful possession of all citizens.\footnote{Christian Barman, F.R.I.B.A., F.S.I.A., “Transport,” in Design ’46: Survey of British Industrial Design as Displayed at the ‘Britain Can Make It’ Exhibition, ed. Council of Industrial Design (London: HSMO, 1946), 136.}

Barman continues, acknowledging the progress that domestic transport has made to establish travel as unrestricted and affordable for lower socioeconomic classes. Small cars and minimized differences between first and second-class railway compartments (which Barman notes “are so nearly similar that foreigners often cannot tell the one from the other until the trifling differences have been pointed out to them”) are evidence that postwar Britain is a progressive Britain, in which class boundaries need not structure the output and offerings of industry.\footnote{Barman, Design ’46, 136.} Moreover, this movement is a signature of liberal democracy, which naturally promises equality not only in the market, but in regards to the welfare of its citizens. Britain Can Make It, then, framed the postwar nation as a pure democracy, as a nation that valiantly battled through world war, retained its industrial competency and prestige, and emerged more progressive, more eager to fight for the well-being and betterment of all Britons — at least as consumers. Leslie and Barman showed that, while socioeconomic groups may have existed, postwar British industry had pursued an agenda of egalitarianism and balanced welfare. Classes were merely functional identities, and were not representative of division. Postwar industry provides equal opportunity to all consumers, whose respective classes constituted the diverse and amicable fabric of the nation.

Britain Can Make It thus pitched modernity in British industry as a phenomenon accessible to all income-levels. Were visitors to the exhibition convinced by the postwar Britain
that the V&A had on display? Even though Mass Observation concludes that visitors used “modernity” to praise products and new designs, whereas “old-fashioned” became a form of criticism, the exhibition persuaded few that they would actually obtain these goods in the near future.\textsuperscript{227} As the wife of an engineer commented, “I am a bit disappointed that we can’t buy some of these things now [original emphasis]. It’s one thing knowing that \textit{Britain Can Make It} but what I want to know is when can Britain get it.”\textsuperscript{228} This impatience to buy, as described above, undervalued the intended purpose of the exhibition. Furthermore, a disbelief in the present indicated reflects growing pessimism in Austerity Britain. Mass Observation notes that while visitors praised plastic and aluminum products (“plastic curtains are touched by almost everyone passing them”), glassware products were considered “exotic and unattainable.”\textsuperscript{229} Several visitors even found the displays to illustrate a lack of progress in design. One stated that while he found the exhibition “exceptionally good… there is nothing standing-out about it, most of the designs were foreseen by us in the pre-war days.”\textsuperscript{230} Another expressed, “Lots of things here are no different to what they were before the war. The furniture wasn’t any good really, I wouldn’t like furniture like it.”\textsuperscript{231}

And yet, the exhibition received generally positive reviews from those leaving, despite the criticism overheard or the fatigue visitors showed upon exiting the museum. Four out of five people, Mass Observation affirms, enjoyed themselves. One housewife, whose husband’s profession was a dustman, recalled, “All of it, it was all interesting, that’s what I say. It ain’t often you come across a place where you’re interested in everything but this Exhibition caters for

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\textsuperscript{227} Mass Observation File Report SxMOA/1/2/26/1/A, ‘Britain Can Make It Exhibition,’ September 1946.
\textsuperscript{228} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{229} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{230} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{231} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
everyone.” For the majority, modernity sold. Even if visitors criticized the unavailability of the products, newness did make an impression. 95% of those leaving the exhibition confirmed that they wanted something within Britain Can Make It. Visitors may not have fully believed in the Britain on display; however, they sought that same future.

Although the advertised purpose of the Britain Can Make It exhibition was to host a public confirmation of postwar industrial recovery, while celebrating the manpower and craftsmanship behind the machine, the Council of Industrial Design and visitors had ulterior motives. Britain Can Make It cultivated the idea of a postwar nation free from social strife and conflict. The exhibition welcomed visitors to an egalitarian Britain where classes existed as mere indications of social purpose, to a New Britain where industry supposedly supplied all citizens with equal opportunities to consume newness and the latest fashions and models for the consumer’s home environment and lifestyle. Consequently, visitors were mostly receptive to the Britain on offer. Britain Can Make It became a golden chance to entertain wartime ideals. The Council of Industrial Design sold postwar industry as a buttress of an egalitarian utopia where “a community of people with advanced social standards, eminent commonsense, their own brand of humane cheerfulness, and a marked instinct for comfort can—it is agreed—be a political portent and beacon.” In this new society, modernity was not a luxury that only those with financial reserves could afford. The exhibition maintained that all interested buyers could enjoy newness. If upper-class consumers wanted a white bidet, a white bidet they would have. If working-class consumers wanted a plastic toilet seat, a plastic toilet seat they would have. These rosy assumptions did not reflect the reality outside the exhibition.

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232 Ibid.
233 Ibid.
234 Leslie, Design ’46, 10.
Paradise Lost: The 1947 Battle for Output and Postwar Economic Crises

Early 1947 suggested that Britain may never “get it” — plastic toilet seats and all. The winter following the Britain Can Make It exhibition, the nation entered a crippling fuel crisis that resulted from labor and equipment shortages in the coalmines. This accompanied insufficient exports, a marginally reduced unemployment rate, budget cuts in housing programs, and a noticeable lack of improvement in living standards. As The Times found, although the government placed emphasis on the need for a higher quantity of goods and services leaving Britain, exports “still failed by £200,000,000 to pay for a volume of imports no more than 70 per cent of 1938.” These reality checks contrasted from the optimistic economic evaluations that comprised the 1947 white paper, a fifty-page booklet issued by the Labour government on the state of the economy and the year’s industrial objectives. Entitled The Battle for Output, the booklet called for an expansion of “the nation’s labor force, to increase its output, and to insure the placement of labor in the most useful jobs.” Britain, the white paper revealed, was not on track to achieving its full industrial potential with maximum efficiency.

Not only had this decline in production prevented living standards from increasing in 1945 and 1946, but the lack of output threatened the nation’s long held influence, prominence, and reputation in Commonwealth markets. Workers needed to produce higher quantities of output on an individual level while efforts were underway by the government, trade unions, and employment agencies to resolve labor shortages in major industries like textiles, agriculture, and coal mining. As Bernard Wall said in his essay Britain and the Crisis (1948), the government

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had failed to warn the public of “a new period of ‘sweat and tears’” following the war.237 An inability to appease discontent continued to kindle a culture of pessimism, with downcast hopes and feelings of helplessness, well into the late 1940s and during the twilight of the Labour government. Moreover, the aspiration for egalitarianism in the postwar era had long departed. The production crisis, the government argued, resulted from working-class inactivity. This alienation resulted in a fracture between Labour’s working-class image and workers themselves. A familiar socioeconomic division had emerged between the political establishment and disillusioned worker.

The worker controlled whether output increased, the white paper asserted. It raised “alarm over the inflationary trends and…stressed that primary and overriding consideration must be given to maximizing output and steadying costs, if Britain was to regain her international solvency.”238 Here, The Battle for Output was a plea for productivity in place of leisure. As a Mass Observation report on the white paper added, “In democracy, apathy is every bit as dangerous as antagonism.”239 Because only workers had the means to bolster production, the crisis was nothing but a result of their inefficiency, sluggishness, or even mercenary motivations. The white paper cast blame on workers for slow industrial recovery and imposed rigid expectations on the energy and time spent doing work. “Britain cannot afford the luxury of shorter hours,” it stated, “unless it can be shown that total output will not suffer.”240 As such, the survey bound workers to factory, farm, and mine.

A transportation strike that January, in the midst of the fuel crisis, confirmed this scorn as common sentiment — one that paralleled opinions expressed during the October 1945 dockers’ strike. One middle-class woman exclaimed that the strike was “just terrible. Very selfish — don’t know what the country is coming to. Nobody works hard. People [are] ignorant. Terrible to think of all the food wasted.” A middle-class chemist said that he felt “slightly offended” that the strike had occurred, jeopardizing the livelihoods of all Britons. Wall also criticized public inactivity as a trigger of the production crisis. “Is it [the crisis] a result,” he asked, “of…those now characteristic street scenes in British cities? So that, whereas public spokesmen urge that production must be increased far above the prewar level if Britain is to get out of the morass, in fact one sees immense crowds mooning up and down shop windows or queueing at cinema entrances or occupying every bench in the park?” The civilian, then, who could be working, had full responsibility in ensuring the success of schemes for national recovery. For higher standards of living and the reassertion of prewar and wartime influence, achieving export objectives was imperative, rather than taking the time for an afternoon pint or a trip to the cinema.

Motivations to work and support the reconstruction programme, however, faltered as a result of austerity. An Australian pamphlet distributed to ameliorate postwar prosperity in the Commonwealth expressed an urgency to increase morale through the availability of food. Entitled *Food for Britain*, the pamphlet described how food rationing created “dangerous psychological effects on the British people and their ability to maintain ancient and accustomed place of influence and leadership in the world.” Australia was responsible for aiding “the

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242 Ibid.
244 Pamphlet. “Food for Britain.” Australia 1937, 136.
British people [who] are waging a desperate battle for economic survival on empty stomachs.”

Once again, the empire buttressed British resilience in the fight for world influence and prosperity. Yet domestic producers in Britain acknowledged the necessity of providing an adequate agricultural supply as well. In November of 1949, Sir James Turner, the President of the National Farmers’ Union, addressed a meeting of agricultural laborers congregated for the first lecture of a series called *The Battle for Food*. He stated, “Food production and procurement are the first and most essential social factors in the life of any community and are, in addition, the actual foundations of economic security for an industrial community such as ours.”

Although domestic farming had actually seen an increase in mechanization, productivity, and output since 1945, available crops constituted what *Food for Britain* labeled a “grimly monotonous, distressingly plain” diet “lacking in those nutritional qualities necessary to the highest standards of physical and mental fitness.” Grains and vegetables native to British soils formed the postwar palette, with a noticeable lack of meat and dairy products. This poor variation and range of food provided little support for a demanding workweek, let alone an optimistic attitude for the present. And low morale resulted from more than nutritional limitations. In contrast to the sparkling displays put on by *Britain Can Make It*, “the case of clothing and household goods” presented another grim reality in which “manufacturers were directed to produce supplies of low-cost, plain utility goods, at the expense of more luxurious items.” Austerity, experienced through a production crisis and accompanying fuel shortage, presented an austere and harsh New Britain without much warmth indeed.

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245 Ibid., 139.
The winter of 1946-47 solidified this image. As fuel became a scarce resource, “the British froze in their homes and offices, factories went on short time, no outdoor display lighting was allowed, and precious dollars were spent on imports of coal — with a 200 years’ supply waiting to be mined.”249 The number of Britons willing to forsake light for work in the mines had decreased since the start of the war, and returning soldiers had little motivation to disappear once more and enter the mines. While the Labour government planned to resolve the consequent labor shortage by workers from Poland and Eastern Europe, Britain in the meantime suffered. With one million persons were out of work, the crisis represented the arduous and lethargic recovery at hand. This, and Britain’s “whole prosperity,” Dudley Stamp believed, “depends essentially on her ability to obtain coal that still exists in quantity in her coal fields.”250 With the fate of the nation at stake, “the fuel crisis…reinforced the urgency of these pleas [of the 1947 white paper] for larger production at lower cost.”251 Even if the National Coal Board, established in the summer of 1946 by the Coal Nationalization Bill, had planned to bolster the coal industry with improved equipment and restructure inter-industrial hierarchies, initial efforts had not revived production to maximize efficiency and exports.252 Between 1939 and 1946, output per miner had fallen from 1.17 tons to 1.05 tons, affecting total output by nearly fifty tons (total output in 1939 was 301.9 tons).253 These numbers bettered, however, by the fall of 1948 when employment reached 19.2 million persons and total output for the economy in general increased by 27% from

250 Stamp, “Britain’s Coal Crisis,” 179.
252 Jarman, Socialism in Britain, 166.
253 Stamp, “Britain’s Coal Crisis,” 182.
the 1946 average. Nevertheless, from the fall of 1946 into 1947, reconstruction appeared to stagnate and the better world remained unforeseeable.

In this sense, the concept of planning itself experienced considerable backlash during this period. Conservatives associated the term with the inefficiency of bureaucracy and failure of the Labour government to initiate reform quick enough to lift austerity measures, a criticism adopted by civilians as well. Turner denounced “utopian planners” in his 1949 speech and their naivété in response to economic crises, due to their lacking “an acute sense of urgency.” Because planning had failed to bring recovery into immediate effect, because the absence of improved standards of living then generated discontent and frustration, a skepticism and distrust of political schemes emerged. As The Times affirmed, “Even the experience of the past twenty months, so fully set out in this very document [The Battle for Output], has not yet convinced Mr. Attlee and his colleagues that the only possible foundation for planning is to prepare for the worst.”

A Mr. T.C. Norris of the National Farmers’ Union encapsulated this sentiment after Turner’s speech, voicing concern over Britain prioritizing reconstruction in the colonies over domestic recovery. He states

We should invest primarily in our own home country, for with money expanded on these Homelands they could have their capacity for production considerably exhausted. When we observe that our Government has just expended some £29 million in a fantastic scheme for growing groundnuts in Africa and realize in the end we may lose it all, if Mr. Malan carries out his ideas of making Africa independent of the British Commonwealth, it illustrates… the disadvantages of expending capital abroad at a time when our homeland is crying out for it.

The failure of the African groundnuts scheme in 1951 was the epitaph on planning’s grave. While the losses of India, Palestine, Burma, and Ceylon by the eve of the Festival of

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Britain discouraged Britain from believing in an easy return to world power status, decolonization also marked the loss of the nation’s great scheme – the British Empire.258 Little wonder, then, why the Festival Committee devoted one exhibit to the Commonwealth that summer, isolated from the South Bank and Battersea sites in the old Imperial Institute, located beyond the western edge of Hyde Park.259 Planning had seemingly reached exhaustion.

Therefore, the immediate postwar years presented challenges to the popularity of the Labour government and produced an increasing need for the Festival of Britain. *The Battle for Output* was a confirmation of the deprivation and stagnation that Britain faced despite successes like the nationalization of industries and the establishment of the welfare state. Continuous shortages and economic crises, moreover, offered a poor ground upon which to reduce dissatisfaction. Without fuel, without a satisfying palette, and without much hope for the implementation of wartime hopes, Britain momentarily sputtered. The egalitarian society that members of the public had longed for had not fully materialized, and the New Britain that had

258 Scholars have discussed the extent to which imperialism/colonialism has affected British popular culture and, as a result, made Britons care about developments in the Commonwealth. John MacKenzie, along with scholars like Penny Summerfield and Jeffrey Richards, emphasize how present the empire was in the media, in music, and in juvenile fiction. See *Imperialism and Popular Culture*, edited by John MacKenzie (New York: Manchester University Press, 1986). Because postwar imperialism (or “New Imperialism”) called on Britons to lend a humanitarian hand to help the colonies modernize, the presence of the Commonwealth in the British conscience increased, forming what Wendy Webster has deemed “the post-war people’s empire.” See Webster, *Englishness and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 55-91. Now, some Britons saw the empire as a great planning scheme to bring egalitarianism to the colonies. For an explanation of BBC coverage of empire during the war, see Siân Nicholas, “‘Brushing Up Your Empire’: Dominion and Colonial Propaganda on the BBC’s Home Services, 1939-45,” in *The British World: Diaspora, Culture and Identity*, edited by Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorovich (London: Frank Class Publishers, 2003), 207-230.

259 Leventhal, “A Tonic for the Nation,” 453. He states that the Festival excluded the Commonwealth and from the South Bank for two reasons. The first, because a strictly national focus reduced the cost of the Festival. The second, because a celebration of colonial power seemed inappropriate given successful independence movements in South Asia. For an explicit discussion of the Festival’s approach to the postwar empire, see Alayna Heinonen, “A Tonic to the Empire?: The 1951 Festival of Britain and the Empire-Commonwealth,” *Britain and the World* 8, no.1 (2015): 76-99.
motivated the war effort contained little of the socioeconomic congruity expected. What Britain wanted, it could not get.

A Pacification of the Nation: Social Cohesion on the South Bank

When Hugh Casson, the Festival’s director of architecture, remarked that he had seen the South Bank transformed into “a new world,” he specified who the public owed for this makeover. “Now first of all,” he states, “I want to make it clear that to mount an exhibition of this size is a team job, in which many hundreds of people are concerned. Architects, and engineers, and technicians and building workers in all trades, script-writers and sculptors and typists, and lorry drivers and scientists and painters and canteen cooks and gardeners and clerks…they have managed to transform…27 acres of dilapidated wharves and derelict housing, for generations a disgrace to London” into the main, shimmering attraction of the Festival.260 To the workers, Casson gave recognition. The Festival of Britain was, after all, the product of a collective effort.

The South Bank Exhibition’s exaggeration of reconstruction’s success enabled the Festival Council to paint a glowing portrait of the workers who had contributed to “national revival.” While displays throughout the exhibition highlighted famed contributors to the advancement of British “civilization,” they also stressed the work that ordinary Britons continued to do to support the nation as a whole.261 Downstream circuit pavilions celebrated the works of Shakespeare and Beatrix Potter, honored Florence Nightingale’s efforts to reform nursing, and revered deceased cricket stars, just as upstream circuit pavilions praised James Watt’s steam engine, Sir Charles Parsons’ turbo-electric motors, and Thomas Edmonson’s

invention of the railway ticket “to remember the past and to honour the work of men and women…whose genius and enterprise has given us something to record and celebrate in 1951.”

This elite, however, did not represent the everyday labors and toils of Britain’s working class. As Orwell declared in *The Lion and the Unicorn*, “The heirs of Nelson and Cromwell are not in the House of Lords. They are in the fields and the streets, in the factories and the armed forces, in the four-ale bar and the suburban back garden.”

In paying tribute to citizens who had participated (albeit, perhaps unwillingly) in reconstruction efforts, the South Bank Exhibition sought to pacify the discontent that had emerged from those who most felt the effects of prolonged austerity. These appeasement attempts were often painfully contrived, and offered an all-too auspicious narrative of social harmony that sharply diverged from the austerity experience.

Although the Festival Council encouraged local governments to prepare and clean-up their towns for “hundreds of thousands of guests from overseas,” the celebration was not for the tourists. The council encouraged local authorities to adopt “modest plans for new building, the renovation of existing buildings, clearing and layout of bombed sites, the provision of a new park or street furniture…and so on,” but with the ultimate intention of using the Festival to benefit permanent, local residents. Even if these schemes impressed tourists and rendered superior images of British living standards, improvements made before and during 1951 served to advantage citizens first. Unlike the Festival of Britain, “the 1851 Exhibition was international and unselected; 1951 will be entirely British and will show nothing that does not do this

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262 Ibid., 69.
country…the highest degree of credit.” The Festival wanted to show that reconstruction was for the welfare of Britons, a process “in which… every citizen can share.” New Britain was for New Britons.

According to the Festival, New Britons worked for the benefit of all citizens, especially in their combined efforts to recover from the war. Moreover, this national spirit to undertake mutually beneficial labor now characterized a new Britishness. Here, “the clatter of clogs in the Lancashire mill towns, the to-and-fro of the lorries on the Great Northern Road, the queues outside the Labour Exchanges, the rattle of pin-tables in the Soho pubs, the old maids biking to Holy Communion through the mists of the autumn mornings” became symbols of modern British life. Everyday labor and ordinary Britons, the Festival showed, were just as valuable to the nation as the great inventors and praised cultural figures. All chipped in to support others. With this mindset, the Festival sought to tell “the story of ourselves, of how we live and of how our way of life is served by those who design and make instruments of that living.” Like Casson, the Festival sought to give recognition to the average worker who propped up British society, who made it function so that others could contribute to it in different ways. “Other demonstrations here and abroad,” a guide stated, “have shown a country’s art, its industries, and its institutions, but none has tried like this to recreate a people’s personality from birth to maturity. This we shall not do by abstractions, but by letting the work of British men and

267 Festival of Britain Office, The Festival of Britain 1951, 3.
268 Orwell, The Lion and the Unicorn, 11.
269 Festival of Britain Office, The Festival of Britain 1951, 9.
women, past and present, give evidence of their belief and purpose.”

New Britons had an egalitarian work ethic that constructed the national character.

The craftsman, the South Bank affirmed, represented a wholesome, British dedication to skilled work, an unassuming form of labor that industrialization could not replace. In the upstream circuit, the craftsman featured in the third pavilion on life in the countryside. “Creating the fabric for this varied life, the country craftsman is at work. Much of the modern setting is of his deserving; his are those many properties of the country scene that we take so easily for granted – the hedges and the hurdles, the thatch of cottages and barns, the walls, the harness of horses and baskets that go to market.”

In this sense, the pavilion associated the craftsman with a romanticized, British countryside. Kitsch imagery formed both the presentation of rural landscapes and villages, and the craftsman’s work ethic. “There is a rare quality… in the motions of the craftsman; to watch him is to see a work of art performed. His tools seem like a living prolongation of his hands; his touch responds to the variation in the material he is working. We are proud of these men; they are basic to our way of life, of which machines will never quite take charge.” Highlighting the work of craftsmen through displays on pottery, ceramics, cutlery, glass blowing, and the process of making paper, the pavilion paid respect to the humble profession while affirming its irrevocable place in British culture.

So too did “The Country” pavilion praise farmers, who nourished the nation through the cultivation of the land and embodied the increased wealth brought by rural industrial development and mechanization in agriculture. “It is… to the farmer and his family that we owe the prosperity and permanence of the countryside,” the pavilion stressed, illustrating the

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270 Ibid., 3.
272 Cox, The South Bank Exhibition, 27.
importance of agriculturalists in maintaining and resupplying the nation’s food stores. This recognition produced an archetype of the farmer that, like that of the craftsman, idealized life in the countryside while removing mention of the unattractive aspects of this kind of labor. It affirmed,

> Throughout the whole story of Britain’s countryside, one feature remains constant: the kind of man who has brought it about. It is true that his appearance has changed... Now, he has become a technician putting to everyday use the results of five hundred years of development and of science. He can drive a tractor, and mend and maintain any of his mechanical aids; but still, his feet are firmly on the ground — the ground from which his livelihood and our prosperity have always come, and whose good health it is in his pride to maintain.

Although the pavilion refrained from featuring the farmer as an “old-style yokel” or “rough, uncultured being in corduroys, uncouth in accent and in manner,” it constructed the modern farmer as a flawless and docile contributor to the egalitarian nation. The modern farmer was happy to offer his labor to support New Britain in the altruistic footsteps of his ancestors. In recounting the extent to which the nation appreciated the labor of the farmer, the exhibition painted a rosy account of social cohesion in the postwar era.

The pavilion that followed focused on the harvesting of “Minerals of the Island.” Halfway through the upstream circuit, the South Bank celebrated the invaluable contributions of miners to British industrialization. After having “saluted the men who cultivate the surface of our land,” the circuit introduced “the riches that lie within our earth, the men who dig those riches out, and the men who use this long quiescent wealth as new material for our industry.” Displays presented the immeasurable uses of coal and steel, along with the role of the miner in

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273 Ibid., 19.
274 Ibid., 19.
275 Ibid., 19.
276 Ibid., 21.
collecting iron-ore. They even accented the miners’ noble endurance for working in unideal conditions. Indeed, the pavilion admitted that “no machine can alter the ancient facts that seams are often only waist high, and the roof may not allow an average man to stand upright. No words can convey exactly the feeling of the inside of a mine.”

A miner was thus an exceptional asset to the nation, as few had the facilities to bear such a harsh work environment. For these sacrifices, Britons were grateful. To gain further insight into the miners’ experience, the pavilion even encouraged visitors to enter a reconstructed mineshaft, where they admired the work of the miner and saw “some of his newer tools.” The Festival encouraged visitors to sympathize with their munificent compatriots.

Factory workers were of equal importance to industrial operation. They enabled industry to function, what the “Power and Production” pavilion considered the “lifeline” of the nation, and, as a result, buttressed recovery after the war. The pavilion asserted that “no amount of effort given to research, testing and management, however, can replace the operatives and the craftsmen at the hub of the whole industrial machine.”

Just like the other professions, the factory worker represented an indispensable part of British industry and “the machine age,” as not everyone could perform their responsibilities. Looking at the steelworker, for instance, the pavilion emphasized their impressive ability to manipulate hot metal. “Fireworks and fumes” composed the atmosphere inside the steelworks, where “molten metal is maneuvered like melted butter with what looks like little effort from these men of skill.” In general, moreover, factory workers inherited and built upon a tradition in which their “job…is the result of knowledge and

277 Ibid., 22.
278 Ibid., 22.
279 Ibid., 23.
280 Ibid., 27.
281 Ibid., 23.
282 Ibid., 22.
experience directed upon him from a number of sources.” While featuring the technicalities behind skilled factory labor, “Power and Production” placed these workers in the British industrial enterprise and related their efforts to the prosperity of the nation as a whole. And like the former pavilion, visitors had the opportunity to experience life as a factory worker, as “the public cafeteria in this building will be dressed as a workers’ canteen, so that the equipment of this will also rank as an exhibit.” Once again, the South Bank Exhibition promoted integration between workers and the public.

Shipworkers and sailors, finally, received recognition for their contributions to the nation, as they supported transatlantic commerce and served as the connecting threads that entwined the Commonwealth. The “Sea and Ships” pavilion recalled, “Without the enterprise of our ship owners and their associates in the vast business of operating shipping lines, the growth of the British Commonwealth would have followed very different trends. Without a mercantile marine such as we have now, we people of Britain and our industries would starve.” These workers, then, were essential to industrial prosperity, the lifeline of New Britain. All Britons understood this, the pavilion informed. They preserved the tradition of British naval and mercantile power, and ensured its continuity into the present, working in the image of “our ancestors [who] came by sea and found natural havens here for their craft. We still live on the sea and by it, using this same coastline as the childbed of our inheritance — the building of ships for the world and for ourselves.” Acting in this tradition, shipworkers and sailors were content to carry out the national interest to the benefit of all citizens.

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283 Ibid., 25.
286 Ibid., 29.
Overall, the upstream circuit at the South Bank Exhibition attempted to appease discontent by paying homage to the workers who had fueled the reconstruction process, especially in British industry and in manufacturing. Because the South Bank highlighted reconstruction’s successes, it needed to acknowledge the efforts of the ordinary Britons who continued, so the story goes, to work and make sacrifices for the benefit of all citizens. An egalitarian work ethic had, apparently, continued from the war into reconstruction. In emphasizing this collective mentality, the upstream circuit produced a harmonious image of the postwar nation that lacked class tensions, and educated visitors on the key roles that workers undertook to make New Britain tick – a mechanism that, under austerity, had sometimes needed rewinding.
CONCLUSION

The 1951 Festival of Britain was not only a “tonic for the nation,” a restorative celebration given to Britons for their resilience during the war, but a confirmation of the successes of reconstruction in the immediate postwar period. On the South Bank, the Festival Council constructed pavilions that stressed the egalitarian benefits made possible through socialist legislation, benefits that some Britons had dreamed of in the early war years. Planning for the postwar era had begun as early as 1941, where formal reconstruction proposals boosted public morale and incentivized civilians to voice their own hopes and expectations for an envisioned New Britain. While some of these ideals became increasingly unachievable and utopian, the South Bank Exhibition packaged reconstruction as having established a better, egalitarian world based on socialist democratic principles. At the Festival, New Britain remained a shiny utopia and not an applied ideal.

Paradise, indeed, was lost. Despite substantial progress made through socialist legislation, such as with the nationalization of core industries and the creation of the welfare state, change did not reach and then satisfy some working-class Britons quickly enough. Strikes remained telling signals of discontent with continued austerity measures, where the October 1945 Dockers’ Strike presented an emerging, postwar pessimism that deflated wartime hopes for the better, egalitarian future. Marked by schismatic class tensions and refusals to recognize the humanity of the dockers themselves, the strike offered a precarious inauguration to the postwar reconstruction programme that sought to establish a philanthropic, social congruity. Nearly one year later, the V&A’s Britain Can Make It exhibition attempted to present this very image. Even if a class system continued to exist, the exhibition promoted a socioeconomic harmony that had overcome timeworn prejudices and inequitable discrepancies in standards of living. Now, New Britain
prompted the idea that all classes could enjoy and consume modernity. While most visitors did express satisfaction with the egalitarian world on offer, the upcoming winter brought a paralyzing fuel shortage that welcomed Britons into a period of severe economic crises. Labor scarcity in all major industries evidenced an arduous, unforgiving, and incremental reconstruction process. An acute deficiency in exports, together with strict rations, monotonous diets, and instability and violence in the Commonwealth showed that the nation had little momentum to once again secure its status as a world power. The postwar era thus underlined the inability of planning to ensure the full implementation of the ideals and expectations assembled during the war. During the late 1940s and into 1950, the future remained ambiguous and uncertain, regardless of the promising and structured proposals of the early war years.

Discontent reinforced the need for the Festival of Britain in 1951, a celebration not just of British culture, but of industrial revival. It confirmed recovery, heralded the people’s perseverance in face of demanding conditions, and showcased the egalitarian Britain that postwar reconstruction had supposedly achieved. At the South Bank Exhibition, the upstream circuit identified those who had helped to bring about the better nation as well, and attempted to appease the workers who had felt the weights of wartime and postwar austerity the most. Providing visitors with opportunities to learn more about and even experience the everyday lives of craftsmen, farmers, miners, factory workers, and shipworkers, the Festival encouraged integration and understanding among Britons. While not suggesting that the nation had reached a new, unparalleled dawn of classlessness, the South Bank nevertheless gave the impression that reconstruction had transformed Britain into the egalitarian society envisioned and requested by the people during the Second World War. In New Britain, everyone was content to work for the benefit and welfare of the other. In New Britain, the collective war effort of the past had
transformed into a collective effort to better endow the future. According to the Festival, myth had become reality.
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