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An Utterly Exasperated History of Modern Britain

John O'Farrell

About the Book

Following his hugely popular account of the previous 2000 years (which won ‘Best Comedy History Book’ at the 1815 Congress of Vienna) John O’Farrell now comes bang up to date with a hilarious modern history asking ‘*How the hell did we end up here?*’

All the major post-war landmarks are faithfully recorded. The sombre day in 1967 when Harold Wilson went on the television to announce that Britain was converting to flared trousers. The tragic split of seventies rock superstars The Wombles after Great Uncle Bulgaria overdosed on amphetamines and bourbon. And the mild scandal of the 1981 Royal Wedding when Lady Diana’s marriage vows omitted the word ‘obey’; declaring instead that she would ‘*Love, honour and then utterly humiliate the Royal Family with a string of embarrassing revelations after shagging James Hewitt*.’

An Utterly Exasperated History of Modern Britain informs, elucidates and laughs at all the bizarre events, ridiculous characters and stupid decisions that have shaped Britain’s story since 1945; leaving the twenty-first century reader feeling fantastically smug for having the benefit of hindsight.

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AN UTTERLY EXASPERATED HISTORY OF MODERN BRITAIN

Or 60 Years of Making the Same Stupid Mistakes as Always

John O'Farrell

Great Moments in British History
(and some mediocre ones to pad it out a bit)

May 1945	Second World War ends. Germany unconsoled by Britain saying ‘Oh well, it’s not the winning; it’s the taking part that counts.’
August 1945	Nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki for a stunt on *Top Gear*.
1946	Nazi war criminals executed at Nuremberg. Lone woman pen pal from Droitwich advised against romantic death-row marriage.
1947	Patriotic fervour grips Britain as Princess Elizabeth marries Prince Philip. Couple asked not to do their marriage vows in German.
July 1948	Launch of National Health Service by Nye Bevan is delayed. Doctor’s receptionist wouldn’t give him a date.
Dec 1949	BBC review of the decade features second rate comics saying ‘And do you remember the firebombing of Dresden? What was that all about?’
1950	Korean War breaks out. Britain and United States determined to prevent South Korea and Japan from going communist, so that they could develop free market economies and wipe out their car industries a few decades later.
1951	Tories return to power. Decide to keep heavy industries nationalised but will just talk down to them a bit more.

1952 George VI dies at the age of 56. Doctors conclude it was because he didn't smoke enough.

1953 Elizabeth II crowned Queen and does 'waving from passing carriage' act. Excited critics say 'this could run and run …'

1956 Suez Crisis sees Great Britain humiliated after going against wishes of United States government. British government promises never to do it ever again.

1959 Harold Macmillan says 'You've never had it so good!' John Profumo blushes.

1963 Beatles have first number one with 'Please Please Me'. Lennon refuses to consider McCartney's 'The Frog Chorus' as possible follow-up.

1964 Labour wins election. Promised 'white hot heat of technological revolution' is cancelled; 'replacement bus service now in operation.'

1966 England defeat West Germany in World Cup final after extra time as elaborate ruse to distract German guards while POWs tunnel out of Stalag Luft III.

1967 Summer of Love followed by Autumn of Throwing Up Every Morning.

1971 Decimal coinage introduced in order to annoy old people.

1972 British car strikes reduce production of Austin Allegros and Morris Marinas. Rest of world copes.

1973 Britain joins European Economic Community. Discovers that foreigners don't understand

English if you just shout it at them.

1974 Oil crisis and miners' strike reduces Britain to a three-day week as power cuts, rampant inflation, IRA bombs and soccer violence confirm national decline. Government announces Womble cull to cheer everyone up.

1977 Silver Jubilee sees Royal Family vying for attention with punk rockers. Their foul language, drunken behaviour and Nazi armbands shock the Sex Pistols.

1979 Mrs Thatcher becomes first woman PM. Shots heard as her car approaches Westminster. She is asked to hand the gun over and close the window.

1981 Prince Charles marries Lady Diana Spencer after extensive search for suitable bride who won't cause any embarrassment.

1982 Argentina invades the Falkland Islands. Early details are sketchy, but government says they may be in the Caribbean or South Pacific, maybe?

1984 Year-long miners' strike sees news dominated by violence and suffering in Labour voting areas. Mrs Thatcher buys a VHS recorder.

1987 Yuppies lose jobs in stock market crash. Hurricane brings trees crashing down onto yuppies' Porsches. Belief in God at all-time high.

1990 Mrs Thatcher joins ranks of unemployed. Blames Thatcher.

Feb 1992 Britain signs up to European Superstate. Voting in Eurovision Song Contest proves all petty rivalries a thing of the past.

Oct 1992	Black Wednesday: Conservative economic policy in tatters after they learn that EMU is nothing to do with Rod Hull.
May 1997	Labour landslide includes over 100 women MPs arriving in House of Commons. At Prime Ministers' Questions, Tony Blair is forced to ask them their plans for the day too.
Aug 1997	British public persuaded that the late Princess Diana lived her life a little bit like a candle in the wind. Henri Paul loses no-claims bonus.
2000	Millennium bug fails to bring planes falling out of the sky, to disappointment of those who hoped they might crash into the Millennium Dome.
2003	Britain joins America in war against Iraq to prevent Saddam Hussein using weapons of mass destruction or his giant Death Star.
2007	Gordon Brown becomes Prime Minister after ten years of planning how to make a really good impression with the British press and general public.
2008	Capitalism finally implodes. British socialists at last celebrate the nationalization of the banks – only to find there's no money left in them.
2009	David Cameron has 15 old Etonians on his front bench. Britain prepares for another 2,000 years of upper class idiots in charge.

Introduction

Why write a funny history book? ~~Well the last one sold quite well and my accountant said~~ It's not simply a question of making difficult historical facts easier to digest; of producing a *Horrible History for Grown-ups* because humour is more fun than scholarly study. I believe that comedy is an appropriate prism through which to view the past because the British sense of humour has actually helped shape our island story.

As well as cheering people up through centuries of suffering and exploitation, irreverence, sarcasm and humour have been a distinctive feature of the British mindset down the centuries. Millions of Italians thought Mussolini was their national saviour. Millions of Germans were prepared to kill or be killed for Adolf Hitler. But how did the British people react to their own would-be führer Oswald Mosley? They laughed at him. They took the piss. They thought he was a joke. And it's hard to give the fascist salute to your 'master race' when lots of them are shouting, 'Oi, Oswald? Show us your sweaty armpits again!!' before falling about laughing. Whether it's the religious zealots of the Reformation or the Socialist Workers shouting outside the Arndale Centre, our instinct has always been to chuckle at their certainty, to be amused rather than angered. You'd never get a British kamikaze pilot. They'd just go, 'Absolutely, mate, I'm definitely going to deliberately crash my plane into that big ship …' and an hour later all the members of the Suicide Squad Union would be in the canteen having a cup of tea and saying, 'He's having a

bloody laugh, he is. I'm not flying my plane into an enemy warship. It's against Health and Safety for a start.'

This book follows directly on from my epic bodice-ripper, *An Utterly Impartial History of Britain (or 2000 Years of Upper Class Idiots in Charge)*, although you don't have to have read that book to enjoy this one. Like that irreverent history, this account is, of course, anything but impartial. However, I won't give any hints as to my political leanings, though readers may pick up little clues along the way, such as when I write 'Mrs Thatcher! Boo!' or 'Nye Bevan! Hooray!'

The story begins with the end of the Second World War, with Britain bankrupt and massively in debt, and ends in 2008 with Britain … well, you get the general idea. For that extra sense of authenticity I decided to write and research this book in the appropriate manner for each decade. So the chapter on the late 1940s was painstakingly researched in a dusty old library with the assistance of a shy but beautiful librarian who wore glasses and consequently had never married. To write about the 1960s I just dropped a huge tab of LSD and bashed out a stream of consciousness on a portable typewriter. And for the twenty-first century with my deadline looming – well, I just found an undergraduate essay on the internet and cut and pasted the whole lot.

J O'F – Summer 2009

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1945–1951

How a Labour government fundamentally changed Britain and the world for the better, but it was all rather spoiled by the absence of chocolate

APRIL 1945. MUCH of Europe lay in ruins. Whole cities were reduced to rubble; roads, railway lines and bridges had been destroyed. Millions had lost their lives, the old world order had been shattered and Adolf Hitler, chief architect of this utter catastrophe, was now considering suicide. So it was a pretty tough call for the trainee counsellor manning the phones at the Samaritans that evening.

'You mustn't blame yourself for everything. Try and look on the positive side …'

'*There is no positive side*. I am personally responsible for the death of thirty million people; I have destroyed an entire continent and brought disaster and shame upon my own country …'

'Yes, but … it's better than bottling it all up.'

'And now everyone's against me: Russia, Britain, America; they all think I'm like, a *really bad* person …'

'Well, we all do bad things sometimes. But at least you were trying to make a difference, that's the main thing … What was that bang?'

'I've just shot my Alsatian. And now I am going to shoot myself through the mouth.'

'Er, hang on … I'll just see if my supervisor is free at the moment; I'm going to put you on hold; you'll hear some light classical music, hello? Hello?'

Britain ‘wins’ Second World War

Great Britain had, of course, played a central role in the titanic conflict whose outcome had so depressed Adolf Hitler. The Russians may have sacrificed more lives, the Americans may have spent more money, but by refusing to surrender in 1940, Britain crucially provided *the time* for the world to gather itself and eventually turn the tide against fascism. Thus it was that the British emerged from the war with an enormous sense of pride at the lone stand made against the Nazis and Britain’s huge contribution to the eventual defeat of Germany. Fascism was discredited as a political creed; democracy was virtuous and triumphant. Henceforth middle-aged men at medal fairs would only be interested in the emblems of the victorious Allied forces; Nazi insignia and the badge caps of the Waffen-SS would have no titillating appeal whatsoever.

The war had been in the papers a lot over the previous six years but unlike so many of the headlines today – *Lottery winner had ASBO*, *Kid 13 is a dad* and *Person who is on the telly once did something bad* – the national front pages[1] really mattered. The news was directly experienced by the nation. The outcome of the Battle of Britain determined the future for everyone. Information about the Blitz was a matter of life or death. You can’t help feeling that if we were living through the Blitz today, ITV would do a cheery Bomb Forecast, followed by the Bombing Forecast for Your Local Area sponsored by Powergen.

But that’s not to say the people fully grasped what had just happened, and on 8 May 1945, a misleadingly positive bit of government spin was sold to the British people. They were told they had won the Second World War. The government dared to tell them that after six years of crippling conflict, the destruction of homes, factories, the loss of the merchant shipping fleet and the gold reserves,

Great Britain was somehow one of the winners. ‘But they just have to look out the window at the rubble everywhere …’ said a worried Winston Churchill, ‘… or count the casualties, or look at the national bank balance to see that by any measure, we are completely and utterly stuffed …’

But the exhausted British people were more than happy to believe the whole ‘total victory’ story, despite the obvious absence of tons of looted gold treasure or whole new swathes of wealth-creating territory. The crowds thronged around Buckingham Palace, cheering the King and Queen and the Prime Minister; they sang ‘Rule Britannia’ and ‘God Save the King’ and climbed up lamp posts waving the Union Jack, as complete strangers hugged one another, shared bottles of beer and had drunken euphoric sex in shop doorways. Nineteen-year-old Princess Elizabeth and her sister Princess Margaret had been permitted to mingle anonymously in the crowd, though whether the future Queen snogged any drunken squaddies is not recorded. Everyone was swept along with jubilation and pride and relief that invincible Britain had finally emerged victorious.[2] And that is where the problems really began.

Now let’s lose the peace!

Germany knew it had cocked up in quite a big way. Japan knew it had to totally rethink how it came up with blue-sky ideas like ‘Let’s go to war with America’. Even the French had witnessed the total failure of its pre-war systems and the disastrous consequences of its complacency and deep internal divisions. But Britain’s institutions seem to have been completely vindicated by the outcome of the war; after all, hadn’t this experience been the nation’s ‘finest hour’? The civil service weren’t hanging their heads in shame in 1945 and saying, ‘What an utter disaster! How

did we let things come to this?' The Foreign Office weren't asking, 'Why did our chaps trust this Hitler fellow for so long? Why were we so unprepared for war?' The army weren't asking why it didn't win a single victory until after Russia and America came into the war; the newspapers weren't being asked how so many of them had supported Hitler in the 1930s; the public schools weren't facing up to their failures and admitting, 'We are responsible for generations of leaders who have been imbued with a disastrous combination of supreme arrogance and utter ignorance about life in Britain. Clearly we owe it to the nation to abolish ourselves.' And so the decades after the war saw Britain being overtaken by countries that had started from an even more desperate position in 1945 but were at least aware of it.

The support that had brought victory to Britain in wartime would not be there in peace. Much as they might have wished it, the British motorcycle industry could not rely on the Americans to bomb the Japanese moped factories. The German football team would not have to face eleven Russians attacking them from the other direction. In 1940 Britain had stood alone militarily. Now it had to stand alone economically, and nobody quite appreciated that this was going to be even harder.

It was decided that no post-war reparations would be required of Germany because the crippling compensation demanded after the First World War had been seen as a contributory factor to the rise of Hitler. However, given how well the German economy has done since the 1950s in relation to the British, one can't help wondering if it is not too late to change our mind about this. It might cause a bit of an awkward atmosphere in Brussels, but considering that Britain has never quite recovered the economic dominance of Europe that it enjoyed prior to 1939, a late invoice for, say, a trillion trillion euros as compensation for the Second World War has got to be worth a shot.

Future perfect

The history of post-war Britain really starts with an ageing former civil servant sitting down at his desk in 1941 having been instructed to write a very long and boring report. ‘Social Insurance and Allied Services’ it said at the top of his note from the Ministry of Labour. ‘Hmmm,’ pondered the academic. ‘Social insurance …? Social insurance …?’ And then he coloured in all the vowels on the memo and decided to make another cup of tea before he got started.

‘It’s just not fair,’ he mused, staring out of the window of his poky office in Pimlico. ‘Buffy is over in Crete fighting German paratroopers. Todge is in North Africa, pushing the Italians out of Libya. Fred is captain of a cruiser in the North Atlantic. And I’m stuck here trying to think of something interesting to say about the bloody anomalies of the various social insurance schemes …’ At dinner parties friends would ask him what he was working on, and then their heads would fall into the soup out of utter boredom. His office staff would pretend to be German spies to get arrested rather than have to listen to him reporting how seven different government departments currently administered welfare provision.

So mind-numbingly boring was his task that he put it off for a whole year. And when he came back to it in 1942, when the Russians were pinning down the German Sixth Army in Stalingrad and the Japanese were losing the Battle of Midway in the Pacific, the only solution for this frustrated pen-pusher was to completely ignore his original remit and write something much more exciting instead.

Thus it was that the publication of the Beveridge Report in December 1942 utterly transformed the mood in wartime Britain, paving the way for a radical post-war Labour government and establishing the template for the modern welfare state. For Sir William Beveridge had used the

opportunity of this dull internal government review to pen a radical proposal for a fairer, more compassionate society. Warming to his theme, he set out carefully costed proposals for a national insurance scheme, universal entitlement to old-age pensions, a family allowance and a ‘national health service’ available to all. He explained how Britain would be stronger and more prosperous if her people were set free from the five giant evils of ‘Want, Ignorance, Disease, Squalor and Idleness’. Sadly no mention was made of ‘Having too many remote controls for the DVD, telly and everything’.

So total was his failure to write the report that had been commissioned that the other members of the committee had their names taken off the final draft. Winston Churchill and the rather alarmed Conservative Chancellor Sir Kingsley Wood made it plain that their government had no intention of implementing any of these extravagant and expensive recommendations. But in a classic example of one government department being unaware of what the other is thinking, the report was seized upon by the Ministry of Information, who saw its potential to boost morale during the dark days of 1942. The Beveridge Report became an immediate bestseller. A special pocket edition was produced for members of the armed services; it was translated into seven languages and shared among resistance fighters in occupied Europe. The timing had been particularly fortunate: it was published just after Britain’s first victory at El Alamein, when at last it seemed possible that Germany might be defeated.[3] The debate about post-war Britain could begin, and the idealists had their manifesto already set out in detail by this elderly upper-class revolutionary. Social observers noted a marked shift to the left in British public opinion between 1942 and 1943; soldiers debated life after the war, determined that their sacrifices should not be rewarded with the post-war unemployment experienced by their fathers. The seeds

were sown for the greatest electoral shock in British political history, the transformation of British society and, as had been requested, a tidying up of the haphazard social insurance system. That's the bit the accountants were really excited about.

Election very special

On 5 July 1945, the British people went to the polls for the first time in a decade. Both Winston Churchill and Clement Attlee had wanted the wartime coalition to continue until the defeat of Japan, but Labour's governing body ruled that the coalition should now end, and who was Winston Churchill in 1945 to argue with Labour's National Executive Committee?

The Labour Party was fighting from a very low base (a mere 154 Labour MPs had been elected in 1935); it had a particularly uncharismatic leader in the quietly spoken Clement Attlee, who was up against the hugely popular war leader Winston Churchill at his moment of triumph. No one gave Labour a hope.

Winston Churchill began the campaign with a crass misjudgement as he declared that Labour's socialist programme would need some sort of Gestapo to implement it. It was such a momentous gaffe that the deeply offended socialists resolved there and then never to call the Tories 'fascists' or compare any future Conservative leaders to 'Hitler' ever again; 'until, say, May 1979'. The next evening Clement Attlee went on the radio and thanked the Conservative leader for reminding everyone of the difference between Churchill the war leader and Churchill the party leader in peacetime.

But the election campaign continued with everyone still expecting Churchill to be returned with a large majority – the newspapers, foreign ambassadors, even the Labour

leadership themselves were about to get a huge surprise. What they had all underestimated was the overwhelming feeling that the great sacrifices of the previous six years must be for something positive – that people could not have endured the suffering, the Blitz and the exaggerated cockney accents just to go back to things as they had been before. In 1918, the British had been promised a land fit for heroes, but the reward for veterans of the trenches had been years of unemployment and poverty. And now another terrible war had been endured, a conflict many blamed the Conservatives for allowing to develop, and servicemen and civilians had passed many long hours in barracks and air-raid shelters, mixing with strangers from all walks of life, reflecting and fantasizing about what might come after all this.

'What I hope is that all them scientists and boffins and whatnot get together and invent an iPod.'

'A what?'

'A little music player smaller than a packet of fags, but one you can keep all yer favourite hits on. Only digitally like.'

'Oh yeah, well, we was hoping for one of them after the last war but it'll never happen. Just give me a portable phone with a little camera in it; that's all I ask for.'

The omens on election day were not good for Churchill when it turned out that the great man himself did not appear on the electoral register and therefore could not vote. Maybe he was still undecided anyway. After the polls closed, the commentators on BBC's *Election Special* team began to speculate about what might be inferred from the rumours from the polling stations. 'Well, it's too early to say. Let's wait for the first actual results to come in – that's the only poll that really counts …'

'OK, well, it's always a race to see which constituency will declare first, and I have just heard that we can expect the very first result in – er – three weeks' time.'

‘Three weeks??’

‘Yes, they have to wait until all the forces’ votes are in from overseas, so the election result won’t be declared until July twenty-sixth. But don’t go away because we’ll be broadcasting live until then. So, Peter, what do you think the early signs suggest?’

‘Er, well, it’s really too early to say …’

Mr Churchill has secured his working majority, declared the *News of the World* the following weekend, and nobody had any reason to think their guess might be catastrophically wrong. In the meantime, ‘the Prime Minister Unelect’ had a minor bit of admin to get out of the way: meeting up with the presidents of America and Russia to redraw the map of Europe, and various parts of Europe were sacrificed to Stalin as long as the West could keep Greece. Being a public schoolboy and Classics swot, Churchill had always clung to some romantic notion about Greece as the cradle of civilization. ‘Sorry, Bulgaria, but we never studied Bulgarian at Harrow.’

When the general election results were due to be declared, Churchill popped back from the Potsdam conference not even bothering to pack properly, so confident was he that he would be returning as the re-elected British Prime Minister in a few days’ time. The leaders of America and Russia couldn’t quite comprehend it when Clement Attlee returned in his place.

Labour had won just under 50 per cent of the vote, winning 393 seats to the Conservatives’ 197; the perceived saviour of the nation was out and utterly humiliated. Churchill and the Conservatives were devastated by the shock defeat, although he was philosophical enough to tell one of his outraged aides: ‘This is democracy, this is what we have been fighting for.’ Stalin couldn’t quite believe that the government had had the ballot boxes under their care for three weeks and still not got the result they had wanted.

‘A modest man, with much to be modest about’

The new Prime Minister was an unlikely leader of a socialist revolution. Perhaps that’s why there wasn’t one. Like the only other Labour leader to win a landslide, he was a public schoolboy who had held conservative views in his youth and gone on to study law. He had been chosen as deputy leader of the Labour Party after virtually all the senior figures in the parliamentary party lost their seats in the electoral wipe-out of 1931. When George Lansbury stood down in 1935, Attlee succeeded him as leader, and so ten years later when Labour won its historic landslide, the former Mayor of Stepney was surprised to find greatness suddenly thrust upon him.

Attlee was not a man with enormous charisma or much ability as a public speaker; in addition to the alleged ‘modest man’ jibe, Churchill called him ‘a sheep in sheep’s clothing’, but the former Gallipoli veteran[4] was a skilful consensus leader of a cabinet of huge and conflicting egos, who was prepared to listen, delegate and compromise but would assert his authority when it was required. On realizing they had received an unprecedented mandate for a radical socialist manifesto, Attlee’s deputy, Herbert Morrison, thought this might be his moment to seize the leadership of the Labour Party. After a tense meeting between the two of them, Attlee slipped away and went straight to Buckingham Palace to be asked by the King to form the next government and Morrison’s chance was suddenly gone.

The famously shy King George VI was so flabbergasted to be confronted by this socialist that the two of them stood in silence for what seemed like an age while the King tried to think of something to say. Eventually the embarrassed silence was broken by Attlee, who said, ‘I’ve won the election.’

‘I know,’ replied the King. ‘I heard it on the six o’clock news.’ In fact, behind his awkward demeanour, the King was not-very-privately appalled at what had just happened. Perhaps the stunned reaction of the upper classes was best summed up by a well-to-do lady overheard in the Ritz: ‘They’ve gone and elected a Labour government. The country won’t stand for it!’

‘How did you find your steak?’ ‘I just moved a chip and there it was.’

Such was the shock of the 1945 election result that it might be imagined that the conservative middle classes were now consumed with fear for their uncertain future, that on 26 July 1945 they suddenly became focused upon this assault on their freedoms, wealth and power. In fact, the day the results came in, the well-to-do British opinion formers were not thinking about increased tax burdens, or restrictions on their businesses, or the position of a socialist Britain between communist Russia and capitalist America. They were not thinking about domestic or global politics at all: they were thinking about cheese sandwiches. And steak and kidney pies, and pork sausages, and roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, and egg and bacon, and apple pie and custard and all the other delicious foodstuffs that had been denied them for so long.

We know that people were thinking about this on 26 July 1945 because that is what people were thinking about every single day; diaries and letters of the period are packed with longing references to food and the aching absence of it. People had endured rationing during the war, appreciating that the tractor factories were busy making Spitfires and food convoys were being attacked by German U-boats. But everyone had sort of presumed that when it

was all over, they'd be able to sit down to a delicious traditional British meal of boiled fatty gammon with overcooked cabbage and cremated roast potatoes. No such luck. Rations were not suddenly lifted; to everyone's abject disappointment, they were increased. The bitter reality was that now Britain was occupying a large chunk of Germany, they had to help feed the people they had been trying to blow up only months earlier.

'Why have they suddenly introduced bread rationing now the war is over?'

'Well, it's so that we can feed the Germans.'

'Oh that's all right then, you should have said, we don't mind making a sacrifice, not if it's for such a worthy cause.'

The British public were urged to 'Eat Less Bread, Use Potatoes Instead'. A chip butty was just some chips in between two very big chips. 'Don't just think of potatoes as something you eat as a side vegetable,' said the government propaganda. Which translates as: 'You remember how those potatoes used to be served with a big piece of steak beside them? Well, now it's just the potatoes.' Even potatoes themselves became rationed in the years after the war, as bacon and other rations were also cut back, and such treats as powdered egg were denied to the British family as the financial crisis worsened.

For our bloated, paunchy twenty-first-century generation, constantly grazing on chocolate biscuits, kettle chips, mochaccinos and blueberry muffins, it is hard to imagine the prospect of going from empty larder to barren grocery store and discovering that there was literally nothing to eat. But for years after the war, just buying the basics could involve long queues and a fractious argument with the butcher or grocer about the measly weekly allocation being handed over the counter. That's why today's pensioners baulk at the wastefulness of throwing away a crust of bread with green mould all over it. 'You

could scrape that mould off and make a nice green soup with it …'

The food that was available was generally of a pretty poor standard. Whale meat could be purchased in case you happened to have a couple of Eskimos coming round to dinner. One recipe recommended boiling the whale meat with an onion before throwing the onion away. 'As well?' quipped *Punch* magazine. Concerns about the shortage of protein prompted the government to import millions of tins of snoek – a little-known perch-like fish from South Africa (South Africa traded in sterling rather than expensive dollars). Snoek was launched with a host of exciting recipe ideas. 'Why have we never heard of this fish before?' wondered the ravenous British public as they eagerly raised the first forkful to their tastebuds. 'Ah – that's why.' Snoek ended up as pet food and even the cats were sniffy about it.

One rather cruel survey of this period asked people to describe their dream feast if there were no more restrictions and shortages. But this only served to remind them that it was impossible for the whole family to sit down to a hearty breakfast of bacon, sausages, tomato, mushrooms and toast garnished with a choice of scrambled, fried or poached eggs. And of course they were just plain and simple 'eggs' back then, not 'farm-fresh organic free-range Columbian blacktail eggs', because the post-war austerity also saw a severe shortage of superfluous adjectives. Today, we feast upon as many extra words as can possibly be fitted onto the packet and a 'cheese sandwich' is a 'pan-toasted Normandy Brie and cranberry triangle on wholewheat granary'. But back in the 1940s, adjectives for food were severely rationed and people had to save their coupons just to put one measly describing word in front of the root vegetable they were having for Sunday lunch.

Oh no – it’s victory in Japan!

Although Japan was clearly losing the war in the summer of 1945, most people assumed that total victory would have to involve invading and occupying the Japanese mainland. This was a forbidding prospect. Japanese soldiers had not gained a reputation for saying, ‘Oh shucks, look, this whole Pacific Empire thing was a terrible idea. Let’s avoid further bloodshed – sod the Emperor, you win this time!’ Some feared that the final and bloody end of the Second World War might not come until 1947 or 1948, such was the magnitude of the task. So it was something of a shock when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945. All at once people had to reconcile the feelings of excitement that the war might end so much sooner, pride that the Allies had such an impressive new weapon and fear that a terrifying destructive new power had come into the world.

The city of Hiroshima was described as a ‘military centre’, which is the usual description for any civilian location destroyed by bombing. A second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki a few days later, sending a clear message to Japan that more bombs would be dropped until Japan surrendered (even if America didn’t actually have any more just yet). It is sometimes suggested that the United States dropped the atomic bombs as a show of force to the Russians, but the chronology of the Cold War does not support this particular conspiracy theory. The American government was not especially hostile to the Soviet government in August 1945; it might possibly be that Washington was motivated by the idea of sparing the lives of a million US servicemen.

However delighted people might have been when Japan surrendered, the sudden and unexpected end to the war in Asia was something of a calamity for Great Britain. Because

the moment there was peace, President Truman ended the Lend-Lease Agreement negotiated by Churchill and Roosevelt that had kept Britain financially afloat for so long. If President Roosevelt, a great friend of Britain's, had not died in the last days of the war, it is possible the cash might not have been cut off quite so soon. But President Truman followed the letter of the law, and suddenly Britain was penniless.

Do you do 'cash back'?

After another national day of rejoicing to celebrate VJ Day, Britain counted up all the money it had left and worked out that there was just enough to send someone to Washington to beg for spare change. The brain-box economist John Maynard Keynes was quickly despatched in the hope of persuading the Americans to lend us a few billion, so that lots of left-wing election promises could be kept.

'So, Britisher, what d'ya need all this money for?'

'Well, the old place is looking a bit shabby, you know, so repainting our funny little pillar boxes, and er, washing the cricket whites, fuel to keep the beer warm, you know what we're like …'

'Don't forget our massive programme of socialist nationalization, sir,' chirped up his helpful assistant.

'Did that guy just say *socialist*?'

'No, no, no, not at all …'

'But, Mr Keynes, sir, on the way over you said our socialist government needed the loan to stop all the capitalist businessmen making huge profits at the expense of the workers—'

Britain's bargaining position was not a strong one, but Keynes argued long and hard. Britain may have become a debtor nation financially, but the country's refusal to make a deal with Hitler in 1940 made Britain a *moral* creditor.

The terms were far from generous: the pound was devalued but British bankruptcy was avoided. It was hoped that once the economy was on its feet again it shouldn't take too long to pay the Americans back. The last instalment was finally paid in 2006. 'And thank heavens we won't be getting back into debt like that again for a very long time,' said the Chancellor.

Politician slammed for smart, clean appearance!

Shortages of food were the most obvious sign of the austerity, but pretty well everything was in short supply. Britain looked tatty, with peeling paint, leaky roofs, cracked windows and dirty buses and trains. Soap, for example, was hard to get hold of and so was not to be wasted on things like washing. Clothes were expected to be worn until they fell apart. It was unpatriotic not to make everything last. When Christian Dior's so-called New Look came in from Paris in 1947, Labour politicians criticized its indulgent, wasteful style that used up so much material in the name of vanity.

With all the rationing and counting points and clothes coupons that carried on after the war, you'd think just one person might have had the left-field idea that could have saved them all an awful lot of queuing and making do.

'I know this might sound like a crazy idea, but hear me out for a second … How about – *we just don't bother with all these hats?*'

'What?!'

'You know, all these trilbies and bowlers and cloth caps and ladies' bonnets and berets, why don't we all just decide that millions and millions of *hats* are a rather pointless drain on clothing material, coupons and factory space?'

‘Don’t be ridiculous – you can’t just go outside without a hat. Everyone would be walking around in the open air with the tops of their heads visible!’

‘You’re right! Sorry, what was I thinking? The only time it is acceptable to be seen outdoors without a hat is when you are on a motorbike.’

‘Exactly!’

Where accountants dare

The challenges the peacetime government set itself were in many ways just as monumental as the achievements of the previous six years, it’s just that popular culture has always found the drama of war more exciting than the humdrum business of reform and reconstruction. Perhaps that’s why there don’t seem to be as many heroic films about the years after 1945; why there is no action adventure classic in which Alec Guinness and Donald Pleasance succeed against all the odds in organizing the welfare payments office in Newcastle.

‘Right, men, here’s the plan: we have to get in there fast, and process twenty-five million National Insurance contribution payments before the fourth of the month.’

‘No, sah! It can’t be done.’

‘Pull yourself together, Johnson! Now I won’t pretend some of you may not come out of there without repetitive strain injury, but those family allowances simply have to be issued!’

Much of Labour’s ambitious domestic programme centred around ‘the public ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange’, as it said in Clause IV of the party’s constitution before Tony Blair changed it to: ‘Everyone just try and be nice to each other.’

Labour’s nationalization programme in 1945 wasn’t just a matter of political dogma; many of these crucial

industries had been badly run before the war, with underinvestment, poor planning and a demoralized workforce. The war had shown how crucial industries like coal and steel and transport were to the nation; their future could not be left to chance. That said, it was worth nationalizing everything just to annoy all those toffs who'd been making a fortune exploiting Labour voters all these years.

Taking the coal mines into public ownership was probably the least controversial of Labour's plans. The coal industry had been taken under state control during both world wars, and state ownership had long been demanded by the workforce. On 1 January 1947, signs were unveiled at pits across the country declaring: 'This colliery is now managed by the National Coal Board on behalf of the people.' It was a deeply symbolic day for Britain's 750,000 miners. They excitedly arrived at work to see who their new boss was. It was the same boss they had the week before with a different logo on his door. There were hopes that under national management and with strategic planning, coal production would now increase. The following month, it stopped altogether. In a frankly rather heavy-handed piece of imagery, the weather decided to empathize with Austerity Britain's frozen economic development and the country experienced the snowiest winter since Dickens's novels. Four million workers were made idle by power cuts, no coal could be dug, no stocks could be moved by train. Even the snowmen looked worried; at least they would have done if anyone could have spared any coal or carrots for their faces.

Power cuts and reduced gas pressure left people shivering in their homes and places of work, with little to look forward to but a nice big lunch of last night's leftover horse meat, in the hope that it might warm them up a bit. When the snow suddenly melted in March, thousands of

people’s homes were ruined by flooding. The Tories had warned them what life would be like under Labour.

The government got its own back on the water by nationalizing it. Roads, electricity and the railway companies were all taken into public ownership. Now that the trains were state controlled, everyone was confident that a sense of patriotic pride and public service would transform that surly man at the ticket kiosk. The Port of London Authority, the Post Office, civil aviation;[5] the impoverished government continued to pay out large amounts of compensation to the previous owners of nationalized industries while keeping their fingers crossed that the cheques wouldn’t bounce. Herbert Morrison was Labour’s nationalization expert from his experience in London government when transport had been brought under public control. The usual template was to set up a public corporation that would be responsible to the relevant minister. Obviously not everything that was nationalized had its own minister; they didn’t have a Minister of Sewage, for example, even if it might have made cabinet reshuffles far more entertaining.

An Englishman’s home is his prefab

In 1947 little plastic building bricks called Lego were launched in the United Kingdom. Architects saw their children cobbling together little square houses from whatever bricks they could find on the drawing-room floor and thought, ‘Right, that’s the design of all the new homes sorted!’

Housing was clearly an urgent priority and again the debate was about which sector could make the greatest provision. The Conservatives argued that private enterprise was best placed to rebuild the hundreds of thousands of homes destroyed by the Blitz. But Labour argued that the