



SEASONS  
IN THE SUN

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THE BATTLE  
FOR BRITAIN,  
1974-1979

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DOMINIC  
SANDBROOK



Penguin

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Seasons in the Sun  
*The Battle for Britain, 1974–1979*



ALLEN LANE  
*an imprint of*  
PENGUIN BOOKS

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*For my mother, Hilary Sandbrook (1945–2011), with love*

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*We had joy, we had fun, we had seasons in the sun.  
But the wine and the song, like the seasons, are all gone.*

Terry Jacks, 'Seasons in the Sun' (1974)

*A huge icy fist, with large cold fingers, was squeezing and chilling the people of Britain, that great and puissant nation, slowing down their blood, locking them into immobility, fixing them in a solid stasis, like fish in a frozen river: there they all were in their large houses and their small houses, with their first mortgages and second mortgages, in their rented flats and council flats and basement bedsits and their caravans: stuck, congealed, amongst possessions, in attitudes, in achievements they had hoped next month to shed, and with which they were now condemned to live. The flow had ceased to flow: the ball had stopped rolling: the game of musical chairs was over. Rien ne va plus, the croupier had shouted.*

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## Preface: A Long Time Ago ...

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*Everything was fantastic. Whoever wrote it had a fantastic imagination!*  
Woman after seeing *Star Wars*, BBC news, 26 December 1977

On the morning of 7 April 1976, a film called *Star Wars* began shooting in suburban Hertfordshire. In American producers had decided to film in Britain because it was much cheaper than staying in Hollywood, and as their principal base they had chosen the vast Elstree studio complex just off Shenley Road, Borehamwood. Once, Elstree had been among the world's most prestigious facilities, the home of *Goodbye, Mr Chips*, *The Dam Busters* and *The Avengers*. But by the time the Americans arrived in this quiet corner of suburban Metro-land, it had long since fallen on hard times. The days when millions of people had gone to the cinema every week were now a distant memory; many cinemas had been converted into bingo halls or simply knocked down. With the domestic film industry in ruins, business had dried up, staff had been laid off and the 28-acre Elstree complex now survived on the income from cheap sex comedies like *Confessions of a Window Cleaner* and its sequels. When the Americans arrived, they found it almost deserted. Like so many British institutions in the mid-1970s, it felt broken, listless, a decaying monument lamenting its vanished glories. 'Drab, ugly, cold, depressing,' was how the producer's assistant later described it. 'But they couldn't have found a better location for privacy. *No one* walked in off the street.'<sup>1</sup>

On the surface, *Star Wars* seems an odd choice to reflect British life in the late 1970s. The brainchild of a Californian television addict, inspired by Westerns, comic strips and Hollywood film serials, it ostensibly has little in common with the world of Jim Callaghan, the Sex Pistols and *The Good Life*. Yet in Britain it was by far the most popular film of the decade, attracting an audience of almost 21 million people. Among post-war films, only *The Sound of Music* has ever done better. More to the point, it was largely a British endeavour. The script, the money and the three lead actors came from Hollywood, but with the exception of some location footage from Tunisia and Guatemala, *Star Wars* was filmed in the heart of the Home Counties. The cinematographer, the set designer and the costume designer were British; so were the art directors, the cameramen, the electricians, the carpenters, the stuntmen, even the orchestra. Almost all of the faces on screen, too, were British. Alec Guinness and Peter Cushing were already household names. Dave Prowse, the West Country actor who played Darth Vader, was familiar to millions of children as the Green Cross Code man. Peter Mayhew, who played the furry Chewbacca, was a porter at King's College Hospital. Of the actors who played R2-D2 and C-3PO, Kenny Baker had appeared in circuses across the country, while Anthony Daniels was an up-and-coming West End actor. And even in 1977, when the film was first shown in London, a few eagle-eyed viewers might have recognized Denis Lawson, who had been in *Dr Finlay's Casebook* and *Survivors*; or Don Henderson, once of *Crossroads* and *Poldark*; or even Malcolm Tierney, who had performed with the Royal Shakespeare Company and later had a regular part in *Brookside*.<sup>2</sup>

As though confirming the bleak reports of British decline in the mid-1970s, the production of *Star Wars* had been a tortured process. The actors' union, Equity, were initially reluctant to allow the film's three American leads into the country, relenting only when the producers pointed out that

hundreds of British jobs were at stake. The film's nominal star, the unknown Mark Hamill, had never before visited Europe. When he went into a London hotel to ask for directions on his second day, the receptionist assumed he was an IRA bomber and called the police. The shy young director, George Lucas, felt equally adrift. Although his temporary home in Hampstead was lavish by local standards, he complained that he could not get a decent meal and his wife could find nothing to watch on television. To add insult to injury, the house was burgled while they were filming, the thieves making off with Lucas's colour television and his wife's jewellery. Even at work he never felt at home; to his British crew, he seemed aloof and unfriendly. He sacked the editor halfway through production, while relations with his cinematographer, the old Hitchcock hand Gilbert Taylor, came close to collapse. Lucas wanted the film shot in soft focus to give it a fairy-tale feel; Taylor refused to use soft-focus lenses. Lucas took the script extremely seriously; Taylor regarded it with amused contempt. 'Bring the dog in,' he remarked whenever the action called for Chewbacca. 'Put light on the dog.' Lucas would have sacked him, too, had he not been afraid that the rest of the crew would walk out in sympathy.<sup>3</sup>

Taylor was not alone in his bewilderment at the young Californian's impenetrable adventure story. By far the best-paid actors in the film were the veterans Alec Guinness and Peter Cushing, who were meant to supply some much-needed gravitas. But neither had any idea what was going on. Guinness even threatened to walk out when the director decided to kill off his character halfway through, and, although he relented, he told the *Sunday Times* that he was 'pretty lost as to what's required of me ... What I'm supposed to be doing, I really can't say.' Cushing, too, admitted that 'a great deal of the script' went completely over his head. 'Many of the stagehands came up to me and asked, "What is all this about? I can't understand a word of it",' he later recalled. 'I told them, "Neither can I. I'm just saying the lines and trying to sound intelligent."' <sup>4</sup>

One sliver of good news for the producers was the collapse of the British pound, which had begun a few weeks before they arrived at Elstree and culminated with the national humiliation of an IMF bailout. With the exchange rate plummeting – in March 1976, a pound was worth more than \$2, yet by the time Lucas returned home, it was barely \$1.67 – they found themselves with an unexpected \$500,000 windfall. But other events seemed to be conspiring against the project. The summer of 1976 was the hottest in history: every day during the last week in June and first week in July, temperatures in southern England reached at least 90 degrees. Every morning, millions awoke to a blazing sun in a clear blue sky. Outside, children frolicked in parks and fountains, while thousands of workers found excuses to slip off to the seaside. 'Fucking amazing weather continues,' the novelist Kingsley Amis wrote to his American friend Robert Conquest at the beginning of July. 'It'll be 90 today and the front lawn is mostly straw. At least the Arabs who are buying up London will feel at home.' But the Americans at Elstree were not happy at all. In order to film against a blue screen, the crew had put up huge arc lights, which sent the temperatures even higher. In the rafters, electricians fainted from heat exhaustion. On set, Peter Mayhew, the actor playing the 'dog', collapsed from dehydration.<sup>5</sup>

If there was one thing that really shocked George Lucas, though, it was the crew's working habits. Since the beginning of the 1970s, American commentators had held up Britain as an object lesson in the dangers of socialism. For *Time* magazine it was a model of 'labor indiscipline and overly ambitious welfare-statism'; for *Commentary* it was an 'industrial slum'; for the *CBS Evening News* it was 'sleep-walking into a social revolution'; for the *Wall Street Journal* it was simply the 'sick man

of Europe'. These were caricatures, of course: if the condition of Britain had really been that bad, Lucas would never have chosen to film there. Even so, he was infuriated by his crew's tightly regulated routine. Every morning they began work at 8.30 before a mandatory tea break at ten. At a quarter past one they had an hour-long break for lunch. At four o'clock they had another tea break, and at 5.30 they finally packed up. At first, Lucas assumed this meant they would begin wrapping up, but by the second day of filming he realized that stopping at 5.30 meant stopping at 5.30. Even if he were in the middle of a scene, the crew would stop dead when the clock reached the half-hour. The remaining shots would have to wait till the following morning, which then meant a further delay when they moved all the equipment for the next scene. Already infuriated by Hollywood restrictions, Lucas could barely believe his eyes. He asked if they would consider working overtime, and discovered that they would have to vote on it every morning. Whenever he mentioned it, they always voted no.<sup>6</sup>

But by Boxing Day 1977, when the film opened in London, all the arguments seemed like ancient history. As Fleet Street triumphantly put it, this 'galactic *Gone with the Wind*', which had smashed all American box-office records, had been 'made in Britain'. Outside the first West End showings in Leicester Square and on Tottenham Court Road, queues began forming as early as seven in the morning. Evening performances were sold out for weeks ahead; outside the cinemas, kiosks sold *Star Wars* brochures for 50p, paperback novelizations for 99p and T-shirts for £3. Tickets swapped hands at exorbitant prices: one 8-year-old boy, Jason Usher, managed to get a seat by writing to the BBC's *Jim'll Fix It*, adding that he was desperate to be an astronaut. And as the box-office takings poured in, at least one member of the *Star Wars* cast found himself with a dilemma he had never expected. Having bargained for 2 per cent of the profits, Sir Alec Guinness was about to become very rich indeed – and, as the *Daily Express* put it, the Inland Revenue were 'already preparing the armoured trucks to haul away 83 pence in every pound'. 'Cut and run,' friends told him. 'Get out while you can.' But Guinness was going nowhere. 'I would keep more if I went to America,' he remarked, 'but I'd go mad.' He did, however, have one request. 'You'd think Denis Healey might send me a letter of thanks for staying,' he mused. 'But I don't suppose he will.'<sup>7</sup>

Not everybody liked *Star Wars*. It was a 'wretched disappointment', Bernard Levin told readers of *The Times*, declaring it 'technically inferior to *2001* and lacking in imagination by comparison, too'. The plot was 'incoherent', the dialogue was 'unintelligible' and it had 'the least attractive hero and heroine I have ever seen'. Yet even Levin recognized that it was more than 'simply a film about a war between stars'. For one thing, he admitted, its clear, unambiguous distinction between good and evil was 'now sufficiently rare, in a film of any pretensions, to be refreshing'. For another, he was impressed that, far from celebrating technology, as so many films had done in the last decade or so, *Star Wars* ostentatiously rejected it. In *2001* (which had been filmed in another corner of the Home Counties, Shepperton), the sets had been painted a gleaming space-age white. In *Star Wars* they were deliberately battered and dirty. Throughout the picture runs a healthy distrust of technological modernity, a message that would have resonated with millions of British filmgoers in an age of resurgent environmentalism, economic decline and cultural nostalgia. And beneath the breathless kinetic spectacle, as so often in the mid-1970s, there was a thick layer of New Age spirituality. Even at the crucial moment, Levin pointed out, the hero turns off his battle computer, preferring to rely on his own instincts, informed by the vaguely spiritual Force.<sup>8</sup>

And this was not the only sign of the times. On the surface, *Star Wars* seems just another slice of nostalgic escapism: there is no moral doubt, no self-hatred, no racial issues, no women's liberation and no sex, while even stylistically there are no flashbacks, no unreliable narrators, no alarming jump cuts or juxtapositions. Like so many British cultural phenomena of the mid-1970s, from the music of David Bowie to the buildings of James Stirling, it is an exercise in cannibalism, a collage of references and allusions. Lucas himself called it a 'combination of *2001* and James Bond', a 'kids' film' that would 'introduce a kind of basic morality'. But had *Star Wars* been entirely reactionary, it would never have been so successful. It presents us with a princess in a dress, certainly, but she knows how to use a gun. At a time when historians and novelists from Jan Morris to George MacDonald Fraser were presenting the British Empire in a much darker light, its anti-imperialist message could hardly be clearer. Peter Cushing's character, after all, is the very model of a British colonial official, coolly unflappable to the last. Its enthusiastic militarism, too, was very much of the moment, reflecting a time when détente with the Soviet Union was unravelling, the temperature of the Cold War was falling and the Leader of the Opposition was calling herself an Iron Lady. Even its moral conservatism matched the wider mood: only two days before Lucas started shooting at Elstree, Britain's new Prime Minister, Jim Callaghan, had promised to return to traditional 'values and standards'. *Star Wars* was a fairy tale, poised between old and new, both excitingly modern and defiantly backward-looking. And in the depths of a cold British winter, with the headlines full of decline and discontent, that was precisely what people wanted.<sup>9</sup>

*Seasons in the Sun* tells the story of the British experience at a pivotal moment in our recent history. It opens on 4 March 1974, when the unprecedented economic and political crisis created by the OPEC oil shock, the three-day week and the collapse of the Heath government brought Labour's Harold Wilson back to Downing Street as the head of a minority government. And it ends on 4 May 1979, when, after an extraordinary series of strikes had ripped the heart out of Jim Callaghan's administration, Margaret Thatcher walked into Number 10 as Britain's first woman Prime Minister.

By any standard these were extraordinarily turbulent and colourful years: the years of the Social Contract and the IMF crisis, the Birmingham bombings and the Balcombe Street siege, the Grunwick strike and the Lib-Lab Pact, the Bay City Rollers, the Sex Pistols and Ally's Tartan Army. They culminated in the industrial unrest known as the Winter of Discontent, which, rightly or wrongly, became the most enduring symbol of the national experience in the 1970s. Many of this period's cultural highlights are fondly remembered, from novels by Martin Amis and Ian McEwan to television classics such as *I, Claudius* and *Pennies from Heaven*. But there is no getting away from the fact that this is generally regarded as the lowest point in recent British history. 'Do you remember what it was like then in the Winter of Discontent?' asked Anthony Quayle's voice-over in the Conservatives' political broadcasts in 1983, which began with haunting images of rubbish piling up in Leicester Square, railway station boards showing a list of cancellations and pickets gathering outside cancer wards. And those images never went away. More than a quarter of a century later, Francis Wheen, who was 20 in 1977, wrote that the 'defining characteristics of the Seventies were economic disaster, terrorist threats, corruption in high places, prophecies of ecological doom and fear of the surveillance state's suffocating embrace'. And even decades after the event, the Conservative press loved to dig out pictures of the Winter of Discontent. 'Vote decisively,' the *Daily Mail* told its readers in 2010,

warning that the hung parliament of February 1974 had produced ‘five years of political paralysis, economic meltdown and national humiliation’.<sup>10</sup>

In many ways this view is a caricature. After all, many people have rather better memories of the decade, recalling the simple pleasures of the *Morecambe and Wise Show* and *The Generation Game*, the excitement of Liverpool and Nottingham Forest’s European Cup campaigns and the sheer high spirits of a roller disco. There can be few children of the 1970s who do not feel a small thrill at the memory of *Bagpuss* and *Mr Benn*, a nostalgic frisson at the recollection of Tom Baker’s absurdly long scarf, or a pleasurable shudder at the thought of Darth Vader’s death grip. And even the economic picture was not quite as terrible as we think. We remember the Conservatives’ stark poster ‘Labour Isn’t Working’, but we often forget that the jobless figures in the late 1970s were generally better than during the Blair and Brown years, let alone the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s. For all the clichés of donkey-jacketed men standing around braziers, there were actually fewer strikes per year in Britain than in Canada, Australia or even the United States. It is true that inflation soared and real earnings stagnated, which came as a great shock to people used to the buoyant growth of earlier decades. Still, most people were better off in 1979 than they had been in 1970. They spent more money on entertainment, ate out more, went on more exciting holidays, bought their first colour televisions and even installed their first central heating. A few months after the end of the decade, some even bought their first home computers in the form of the Sinclair ZX80. Pockets of extreme poverty remained; yet for the great majority, wrote the columnist Peter Jenkins in 1978, ‘the general quality of life in Britain remains probably as high as anywhere in Europe’.<sup>11</sup>

So was this a lost golden age, a last hot summer of the post-war consensus? Some writers, especially on the left, think so. A radical think-tank, the New Economics Foundation, even worked out that for ‘national economic, social and environmental well-being’, the best year in Britain since 1950 was 1976, the year that George Lucas and his crew had been working on *Star Wars*. But it must have been using a very peculiar index of national progress, for even at the time most people regarded 1976 as a dreadful year. When it began, British families were still mourning the victims of the IRA’s bombing campaign in London, while Westminster was digesting news of the government’s decision to bail out the ailing Chrysler car giant. The next twelve months saw riots at the Notting Hill Carnival, the unravelling of the Jeremy Thorpe scandal, the petty sleaze of Harold Wilson’s ‘lavender list’ and a series of appalling sectarian atrocities in Northern Ireland. Even the wonderful weather proved a very mixed blessing, with heatwave turning inexorably to drought. Above all, though, this was a year in which the exchange markets completely lost confidence in the British economy, the pound went into free fall and the government was forced to seek a humiliating bailout from the IMF. Far from being alive and well in 1976, in other words, the post-war consensus was already in its death agonies. This had a profound impact on the lives of Britain’s 56 million people: after twenty years of almost unbroken growth, real earnings fell in 1976 and again in 1977. And far from feeling that they had reached some promised land of peace and prosperity, politicians of both left and right recognized that change was coming. ‘Do you, like me, sometimes feel that we have been slipping?’ said Jim Callaghan, the new Prime Minister, in his first words to the nation that spring. A few months later, he even told the Labour party conference that by trying to spend its way out of trouble, Britain had been living on borrowed time. ‘Higher inflation followed by higher unemployment,’ he said: ‘that is the

history of the last twenty years.’<sup>12</sup>

The truth is that, although many people led happy and comfortable lives, Britain was in poor shape in the late 1970s. This was not a last glimpse of sunshine before the advent of Thatcherism. It was an age that saw two Prime Ministers broken by the unions, inflation heading towards 30 per cent, sporting occasions regularly disfigured by barbaric hooliganism and hundreds of people murdered by terrorists not only in Northern Ireland but in the streets of London and the pubs of Birmingham. Even before Mrs Thatcher came to power, the gap between North and South was growing, while the manufacturing industries on which Britain’s prosperity had long depended were in deep decline. In the industrial working-class cities, unemployment was mounting; in Westminster, almost everybody, from Tony Benn on the left to Sir Keith Joseph on the right, recognized that Britain was facing an extremely painful transition. A rare exception was Harold Wilson, whose final and frankly rather shabby government between 1974 and 1976 has a good claim to be the worst in our modern history. But the administration that followed, under his old sparring partner Jim Callaghan, has been treated too harshly. Both Callaghan and his Chancellor, Denis Healey, made valiant efforts to get to grips with Britain’s economic problems, even if their own party rarely appreciated them. Today, left and right alike see 1979 as a historic turning point. But *Seasons in the Sun* argues that, in many ways, thanks to Callaghan and Healey, Britain had changed course already. Indeed, this book shows that there was rather more continuity between Margaret Thatcher and her avuncular predecessor, ‘Sunny Jim’, than we often think – even though it would pain both left and right to admit it.

What is beyond doubt, though, is that this was a decisive moment in our recent history. It was in this short five-year period, for example, that the British people chose to remain part of the European Community, with incalculable political and economic long-run consequences. It was in this period that Britain turned its back on full-blown state socialism: Tony Benn’s extraordinarily ambitious plan for state intervention in industry never came to fruition, and nobody since then has tried anything remotely similar. This was the period that turned Margaret Thatcher into a national figure, gave British politics its first woman leader, and saw the Conservative Party take a decisive step to the right. It saw the abandonment of full employment, the end of the direct grant grammar schools, the birth of punk rock, the collapse of self-government in Northern Ireland, the first benefits of North Sea oil and the peak of nationalist excitement in Scotland and Wales. On a lighter note, it saw the birth of *Grange Hill*, *The Sweeney* and *To the Manor Born*, the heyday of Rick Wakeman, Elton John and Andrew Lloyd Webber, and an outbreak of entertainingly short-lived hysteria surrounding Scotland’s odyssey in the 1978 World Cup. And perhaps above all, it saw the last gasp of an old collective working-class culture and the emergence of individualism as the dominant force in our political, economic and social life. Afterwards, nothing would be the same again.

This book picks up directly from its predecessor, *State of Emergency*, which covered the unhappy years of the Heath premiership. There are inevitably a few overlaps, usually to give a sense of the wider social and cultural developments of the decade as a whole. Since I covered some subjects at length in *State of Emergency*, notably football, feminism, sex, housing and environmentalism, I have not said much about them here. On the other hand, I have finally got around to discussing the rise of nationalism in Wales and Scotland, as well as North Sea oil, law and order, schools and universities, the first computers and the strange career of Larry Grayson. As usual, I have written more about

England than anywhere else, and probably more about London than is entirely fair. At the heart of this book, though, are the great political and economic questions that defined the era. Far more than, say, the late 1950s or the 1960s, this was an intensely politicized period. In an age of enormous anxiety about the very survival of the United Kingdom, there seemed to be much more at stake. The debates were shriller, the choices starker, the rhetoric more strident. Even escapist entertainments of the day, from episodes of *Doctor Who* to Hughie Green's diatribes on *Opportunity Knocks*, openly referred to the political and economic headlines. Naturally, therefore, the central characters are the nation's politicians: Harold Wilson and Tony Benn, Jim Callaghan and Denis Healey, Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher. Partisan books are boring, and I have done my best to be even-handed. Still, some of these characters struck me as much more sympathetic than others, and that will doubtless come across in the narrative.

Finally, the title. Originally recorded as '*Le Moribond*' by the Belgian singer-songwriter Jacques Brel, 'Seasons in the Sun' is best known in Britain as an unexpected hit for the obscure Canadian singer Terry Jacks. It entered the charts in late March 1974, a few weeks after Harold Wilson's return to Downing Street, reached number one on 6 April and held onto the top spot for a month, eventually yielding to Abba's 'Waterloo'. Like so many mass-market hits of the mid-1970s, from the music of the Wombles to the sitcoms of Richard O'Sullivan, it is often derided as tasteless kitsch. One critic, lamenting its 'hectoring nursery-school simplicity', even calls it the 'unsurpassed nadir of pop music'. Yet there is no doubt that it was popular: despite its mawkishness, people kept buying it, week after week. Perhaps, facing the biggest economic crisis that many of them had ever known, with the long post-war boom a fading memory and the political consensus cracking apart, they were drawn to the last words of a dying man, looking back on his days of wine and song and flowers. More plausibly, though, most saw the song as nothing more than a catchy ditty, offering a quick dose of easy escapism. In an era of almost unremittingly bad news, the headlines dominated by surging prices, terrorist bombings and predictions of disaster, it was hardly surprising that so many people wanted to buy a cheap ballad that would yield a few moments' bittersweet diversion. Nor was it any wonder that so many took refuge in events a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.<sup>13</sup>



# PART ONE

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## The End of the Line

## Brave New World

*Tomorrow's almost over, today went by so fast It's the only thing to look forward to – the past ...*

Theme song from *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* (1973–4)

*These days it's not very trendy to declare that you're a patriot ... And what does loving your country mean anyway? Loving the political party in power? The system of government? The countryside? The people? The lot?*

Full-page British Army advertisement, *The Times*, 10 January 1975

'What a blessing is a garden in such troubled times,' ran a letter from Mrs Massey of Harefield, Middlesex, to the *Daily Express* on Monday, 4 March 1974. 'A mild winter nearly over and today I'm out in the garden watching goldfish in a small pond. Alongside is a colourful bed of heather, bees buzzing around and a lovely orange and brown butterfly. Looking around I see crocuses, roses, pansies and above, a clear blue sky ... My husband has even been mowing the lawn.'

In west London, the pleasures of the English garden were much on people's minds. At the giant Olympia exhibition site, workers were putting the final touches to the annual *Daily Mail* Ideal Home Exhibition, due to welcome tens of thousands of visitors the next day. At its heart was the usual display of six furnished homes in a landscaped setting, but, as always, the exhibition was gently moving with the times. Nicely straddling old and new, the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds had put up displays on 'the Townswoman as homemaker, gardener, citizen, liberator, craftswoman and entertainer'. A special exhibition told 'The Story of Glass', and there was even a section promising to recreate the experience of a 'walk through space, an out-of-this-world experience ... that defies description'. For the more practically minded, the Garden Advice Centre featured talks by television stars such as Geoff Hamilton and Geoff Amos, while idealistic visitors were bound to enjoy 'The Fat of the Land', a stall run by the self-sufficiency guru John Seymour, offering demonstrations of meat drying and beer brewing. And if all this were not excitement enough, there was even a special stand on the pleasures of potatoes, complete with a 'working model of "Potatoboro" '.

It was now four days since the British people had voted in the most dramatic general election since the war, and still there was no resolution to the political crisis. Yet while Edward Heath, Jeremy Thorpe and Harold Wilson jockeyed for power, life went on as normal. In Norwich, unofficial industrial action by railway guards meant dozens of trains were cancelled or delayed. In Lincoln, police blamed teenage 'snipers' with air rifles for a spate of recent power cuts. In Worcestershire, the rural dean of Pershore complained that state schools were becoming 'pagan wildernesses' where 'a mild kind of sociology' had replaced Christian values. In Oxford, police were called to suppress fighting between militant and Conservative students outside the University's administrative offices. In Leeds, two Irish republicans were jailed for possession of 62 detonators and 713 rounds of ammunition 'with intent to endanger life'.

For one couple in Retford, Lincolnshire, it was a blessing that they had even made it to the morning alive. On Sunday evening, Henry and Mabel Abraham had been tucked up in bed, enjoying their first

few hours in their brand-new terraced house after years in rented lodgings. Then, suddenly, there was a gigantic bang, as an enormous gas explosion blew out the windows, ripped out the floor from underneath them and sent their furniture flying into the street. 'When I looked down,' Henry said, 'there was a gaping hole in the floor and I could see flames downstairs. We tried to get down but found our way blocked by a sheet of flame.' Eventually, firemen managed to get them down; amazingly, they were almost totally unhurt. And there was good news, too, in Cambridgeshire, where police told the parents of the missing 16-year-old Rachael Gathercole that they had tracked her down safe and sound, in the south of France with her music teacher, 57-year-old Arthur King. The couple had been planning to get married, the newspapers claimed; indeed, King was something of a serial cradle-snatcher, having married 16-year-old girls twice already. Perhaps his employers should have realized there was something suspicious about him, remarked the *Express*: he 'wears a ginger toupee and 'speaks several languages fluently'.

For those who saw sport as a reflection of the nation's fortunes, there was bleak news on the back pages, where the England cricket party's dismal ten-wicket defeat in Barbados felt like a bucket of water in the face. 'I have known no more chilling moment on tour,' wrote one reporter. 'The home truths are inescapable. Batting-wise, this England party is arguably the weakest ever sent overseas. It is limited in skill, character and guts.' Still, all was sweetness and light in the Black Country, where football fans were still toasting the goals by Kenny Hibbitt and John Richards that had brought League Cup glory to Wolverhampton Wanderers, pride of the Midlands. Few commentators hid their contempt for Manchester City's star striker Rodney Marsh, who had stormed off at the final whistle without congratulating his opponents or collecting his silver tankard from the Duchess of Kent. 'I doubt if he will ever be totally forgiven,' wrote the *Mirror*'s veteran correspondent Frank McGhee, 'for his sour, rancid attitude and appalling lack of sportsmanship ... Marsh spat on a tradition that in this country the loser is expected to summon up a smile, not run away at the end to sulk and scowl alone.' There was a lesson there, perhaps, for the nation's politicians.

In the City, a takeover bid by Boots for the department store chain House of Fraser was looking decidedly uncertain. In the charts, the sounds of the moment included Suzi Quatro's 'Devil Gate Drive', 'Wombling Song' by the Wombles and 'Tiger Feet' by Mud, although the top spot belonged to Alvin Stardust's 'Jealous Mind'. In the West End, Derek Nimmo was starring in *Why Not Stay for Breakfast?*, Richard Briers and Sheila Hancock in *Absurd Person Singular*, Vanessa Redgrave and Jeremy Brett in *Design for Living*, and Albert Finney, Denholm Elliott and Geraldine McEwan in *Chances*. On television that afternoon, children could enjoy *Play School*, *Huckleberry Hound*, *Blue Peter*, *The Magic Roundabout* and *Jackanory*, while the evening's delights included new episodes of *Z Cars* and *Colditz* as well as a *Panorama* special on the secret police in Grenada and a Scotland versus Wales clash in *Come Dancing*. The *Express*'s television critic was particularly looking forward to seeing the Octettes ('eight youngsters playing two pianos') on *Opportunity Knocks*, followed by the latest episode of ITV's sitcom *Love Thy Neighbour*: an 'amusing series', he thought, despite its controversial racial humour. But he was less enticed by the prospect of *Wish You Were Here*, which focused this week on Majorca. 'Doesn't anyone take a traditional bucket-and-spade holiday these days?' he grumbled.

Although foreign travel dominated many conversations in offices, pubs and living rooms that

morning, the mood was unusually sombre. Many people were still digesting Sunday's terrible news about the crash of a Turkish Airlines DC-10 bound for London, which had disintegrated in mid-air over the Ermenonville Forest in northern France. Since the headlines had been full of bombings and hijackings in recent months, many people suspected there must have been a bomb, although in fact the crash was caused by a structural problem with the cargo hatch. But it was the worst air disaster in history, killing all 346 passengers and crew. By a horrible mischance, more than two hundred of them, mostly British, had boarded the plane at Orly at the last moment because their earlier flights had been affected by a strike at Heathrow. Many were returning from the Five Nations rugby match between France and England, and no community was harder hit than the Suffolk town of Bury St Edmunds, where eighteen members of the local rugby club had saved up for the trip to Paris. Many were married: their deaths left ten widows and more than twenty boys and girls without fathers. Among the other victims were four of London's top models, the engineering union leader Jim Conway and the former Olympic hurdler John Cooper, who had won two silver medals in Tokyo in 1964. And in the rubble of the crash site, investigators found the charred fragments of a message, evidently written by a seaman to his sweetheart. The letter told its own story:

To Pat, the one I love and always shall.

I have just spent the last four hours stuck in the engine-room thinking of nothing except you and I feel very depressed and it is getting worse.

My feelings towards you have grown a thousandfold, darling. Nothing in this entire world could ever take the place of you.

I am arranging to have some flowers sent to your mother for her birthday from the both of us. How is saving going my love? Hurry up next year is all I can think of when the greatest day in my life will occur.

Here the letter was burned away; all that was left was the ending:

Pat, my darling, please take extra special care of yourself for me, as I dearly love and miss you very much. When you are by yourself and lonely, as I often am, please remember there is somebody who loves you more than anything else on this entire earth.

All my entire love, David<sup>1</sup>

Harold and Mary Wilson ate breakfast that morning at Grange Farm, their Buckinghamshire country retreat, waiting for the news that would bring redemption. Four days earlier, with the opinion polls forecasting a clear victory for his rival Edward Heath, the Labour leader had been contemplating the end of his political career. Beset by economic and industrial troubles, with the miners out on strike and the nation on a three-day working week, Heath had asked the British people: 'Who governs?' For weeks, the polls had suggested that the Prime Minister would get the answer he wanted. Touring his Huyton constituency on Thursday evening, Wilson had seemed yesterday's man, a downcast little figure trudging through the pouring rain. Behind his bullish public statements, he had even drafted an elaborate escape plan, complete with a last-minute change of hotels and an early morning flight south so that he could escape the press after his second successive election defeat. But when the first results came in, it had suddenly become clear that he would not need it. For although Heath's Tories had won the most votes, Labour had won the most seats, their total of 301 giving them a tiny four-seat lead. With more than twenty seats going to the Liberals and the nationalists, it was not enough to form a majority. But when Harold Wilson awoke on Monday, he knew that unless Heath had somehow engineered an unlikely coalition with the Liberal leader Jeremy Thorpe, the premiership was his once

again.<sup>2</sup>

Late that morning, the Wilsons drove down to their town house in Lord North Street, London, a few tantalizing moments' walk from their old home at 10 Downing Street. It was an unseasonably warm day. By the time that Wilson walked into St Ermin's Hotel for lunch with his press secretary, Joe Haines, his chief policy adviser, Bernard Donoughue, and his political secretary, Marcia Williams, the news was more promising than ever. All weekend Heath and Thorpe had been locked in talks, but a deal seemed increasingly impossible. Despite the staid elegance of the St Ermin's dining room, there was an atmosphere of cheerful excitement as Wilson's aides discussed the new administration – although there was an ominous sign of things to come when Marcia Williams upbraided her boss for not offering Roy Jenkins the Treasury, leaving him 'white with rage'. But when, just before six that evening, Number 10 rang and told Wilson that the coalition talks had collapsed, the bickering was forgotten. As Wilson shaved for his audience with the Queen, the radio reported that Heath had left the Palace. At half past six, a removal van turned into Downing Street. Finally, just after seven, the long-anticipated call came. Harold and Mary went on ahead in their little car; behind them, his aides followed in a rented Daimler. They swept through the gates of Buckingham Palace, past the cameras and the small crowd of cheering supporters, and while the Wilsons were shown up to see the Queen, the others waited downstairs in a chilly room and moaned about the lack of drinks.<sup>3</sup>

At eighteen minutes past eight, as Wilson's car cruised back down the Mall, a statement from the Palace confirmed his appointment as Prime Minister, the first to lead a minority government since Ramsay MacDonald in 1929. A few moments later, easing through the crowds of photographers and policemen, his car drew up in Downing Street. It was almost exactly fifty years since Wilson had posed for a family photograph on the famous steps, a cheeky little boy in a big baggy cap and knee-length shorts. It was almost ten years, meanwhile, since he had walked into Downing Street as a dynamic new Prime Minister, the champion of science and modernization. But this time, as he trudged to the familiar spot, the flashbulbs popping and Mary smiling self-consciously at his side, there was little of the excitement that had marked his first victory all those years before. His shoulders hunched, his smile thin, his eyes weary, Wilson looked older than his fifty-seven years, a white-haired little man in a crumpled suit. And as he laconically raised a hand in victory, there were no fine words. 'We've got a job to do,' he said slowly, his flat Yorkshire voice barely audible above the mingled cheers and boos of the crowd. 'We can only do that job as one people, and I'm going right in to start that job now.' Then he went inside, and the heavy black door swung shut behind him.<sup>4</sup>

'It wasn't like old times,' the *Mirror* admitted the next day. 'Things have changed too much for that.' The optimism that had animated Wilson's first years in government, and that seemed so emblematic of the so-called Swinging Sixties, had long since disappeared. For almost eight years, British morale had suffered blow after blow, from the devaluation of the pound and the outbreak of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland to a crippling miners' strike and the collapse of the stock market. In the midst of this litany of disaster, the voters had kicked Wilson out of Downing Street and replaced him with Heath, another meritocratic modernizer with bold plans to revitalize British industry. But by the autumn of 1973 Heath's ambitions, too, were crumbling into dust. Alarmed by rising unemployment, Heath had told his Chancellor, Anthony Barber, to go for broke. It was one of the greatest economic gambles in modern history: while credit soared and the money supply boomed

Heath hoped to keep inflation down through an elaborate system of wage and price controls. But by October 1973, even as he unveiled Stage Three of his grandiose incomes policy, his hopes were unravelling at terrifying speed. Thanks to the 'Barber boom', the economy went into overdrive, with house prices surging by 25 per cent in just six months, the cost of imports rocketing and Britain's trade balance plunging deep into the red. Above all, just a week after Heath had published the details of Stage Three, the Arab oil exporters in the OPEC cartel announced a stunning 70 per cent increase in the posted price of oil, punishing the West for its support for Israel. It was a devastating blow to the world economy, but nowhere was its impact greater than in Britain.<sup>5</sup>

A few days after Wilson returned to Number 10, the financier Siegmund Warburg warned him that Britain faced 'the most serious economic crisis in its history, a crisis which indeed is not only of a material character but is a crisis of the whole fabric of our society'. He was not exaggerating. With import prices rising, Britain's monthly trade deficit had hit a record £383 million by February 1974. In a desperate bid to reassure the markets, the Bank of England implemented the tightest credit squeeze in living memory, raising the minimum lending rate to an eye-watering 13 per cent and puncturing the last remnants of the property-market bubble. Burned by reckless lending, the so-called secondary banks were in meltdown. House prices, land values, even the markets for antiques and vintage cars, had simply collapsed. The stock market was in cardiac shock, losing a quarter of its value in just a month; by January, share prices had fallen by almost half in less than two years. 'The country is now facing the gravest economic crisis since the end of the war,' Heath's Chancellor had told his Cabinet colleagues in a secret report of unparalleled pessimism. A week before Christmas, he slashed public spending by some £1,200 million (4 per cent), sounding the death knell for an era of economic optimism. Nine out of ten people told the Harris poll that 'things are going very badly for Britain'; only two out of ten thought there would be any improvement in the next year. Labour's Shadow Chancellor, Denis Healey, warned his colleagues that Britain stood on the brink of an 'economic holocaust'. Meanwhile, Heath's Environment Secretary, Geoffrey Rippon, told friends that Britain was 'on the same course as the Weimar government, with runaway inflation and ultra-high unemployment at the end'.<sup>6</sup>

All of this would have been terrifying enough. What made it even worse, though, was the breakdown of relations between the government and the trade unions. After losing one round to the miners two years earlier, Heath had tried desperately to conciliate the union leaders, even offering the Trades Union Congress (TUC) a seat at the table to plan the national economy. But they had turned him down. And when OPEC announced its increase in the price of oil, the miners saw their chance to press for more. In November the National Union of Mineworkers approved an overtime ban. The next day, Heath announced his fifth state of emergency in barely four years. Floodlighting and electric advertising were banned; behind the scenes, the government began printing petrol ration cards. As the railwaymen voted to join the miners in pursuit of higher pay, it seemed that Britain was sliding into darkness. Offices were ordered to turn down their thermostats, while the BBC and ITV were banned from broadcasting after 10.30 at night. On New Year's Day, with fuel supplies running dangerously low, the entire nation went on a three-day working week. But even as Britain shivered by candlelight, peace talks came to nothing. The TUC urged Heath to declare the miners an exception to his incomes policy and give them what they wanted. But he was adamant: nobody must be allowed to break Stage

Three. The talks broke down, and on Monday, 4 February the miners voted for an all-out strike. Three days later, exhausted, ill and utterly demoralized, Heath called a general election, begging the public to back the government. His appeal was summed up in a simple two-word phrase: 'Who governs?' But the answer, it turned out, was equally simple: 'Not you.'<sup>7</sup>

Amid all the pressures that had brought down Heath's government – the chronic underperformance of British industry, the seemingly inexorable rise of inflation, the frightening challenges of a post-imperial world and the apparent impotence of the Westminster elite – it was the question of the unions that dominated the headlines. By later standards, their sheer prominence in British life was simply extraordinary. Almost every day the papers carried front-page stories by their labour correspondents reporting on strikes, go-slows, overtime bans and work-to-rules. On the evening news, burly men with steel-grey hair and thick glasses were forever trooping in and out of Number 10, shaking their heads sorrowfully at what their members would think of the government's latest offer. To the left they seemed the defenders of the working classes and the guardians of the socialist flame; to the right they seemed a state within a state, anarchic, ungovernable, even subversive. Membership was close to an all-time peak: by the end of the 1970s, some 13.3 million people, about 56 per cent of the workforce, belonged to a trade union. With many people desperate to protect their living standards against inflation, white-collar unions were buoyant: in just fifteen years after 1964, the membership of the National Association of Local Government Officers (NALGO) doubled, while that of the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) trebled. And since they appeared so good at protecting their members' interests, there seemed no reason why membership would not keep rising. The unions, wrote the *Economist's* labour correspondent Stephen Milligan in 1976, had 'more power and influence than [the] political parties'; all in all, they were 'perhaps the major political force' in the land.<sup>8</sup>

Trade union power was perhaps the central theme of British political life in the Wilson years. In 1972 five out of ten people thought the unions were too powerful, rising to six out of ten in 1974 and seven out of ten in 1975. In his first administration, hoping to cut down on unofficial wildcat strikes, Harold Wilson and Barbara Castle had proposed a package of reforms, known as *In Place of Strife*. But the union leaders refused to compromise, some of Wilson's ministers kicked up a fuss and eventually he lost his nerve. Then Heath had a go, passing an Industrial Relations Act that provoked massive union unrest and eventually collapsed around his ears. Perhaps it was no wonder that so many people thought the union leaders – the 'new barons', as Milligan called them – were the most powerful men in the land. Indeed, men like Hugh Scanlon, the dour, goldfish-fancying Marxist leader of the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (AUEW), or Len Murray, the mild-mannered Shropshire farm worker's son who had become general secretary of the TUC, were national celebrities, more famous than most ministers.

At the end of 1976, half the public thought the leader of the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU), Jack Jones, was the most powerful man in the country, with only one in four nominating the Prime Minister. The son of a Liverpool docker, a veteran of the Spanish Civil War who had accepted regular KGB donations until breaking with them over the Prague Spring, this bespectacled, bullet-headed man struck fear into the hearts of Middle England. Another union leader remarked that he had 'a smile glinting like the sunlight on the brass plate of a coffin', while the journalist Paul Johnson nicknamed him the 'Emperor Jones', after the Caribbean despot in Eugene O'Neill's play. But nobody

doubted that Jones fought hard for his members: the *Financial Times* called him a 'national statesman devoted to doing what he believes to be best for Britain's workers and their families'. It was a sign of his national standing, as well as the respect he commanded in Whitehall, that the imperial nickname stuck.<sup>9</sup>

Yet the great irony of British life in the 1970s was that trade union militancy was born not out of strength but out of weakness. Far from being bound together by working-class solidarity and a shared dream of a brave new world, most British unions were tiny, fragmented and almost comically old-fashioned. For all the press attention given to the Emperor Jones and his fellow union leaders, they were much less powerful than they looked. Behind the headlines, as the *Financial Times's* labour correspondent Robert Taylor remarked, they were 'uncertain, rather frightened, reactive and muddled men', adrift in a bewildering modern world. And although the language of class confrontation was everywhere in the late 1970s, most union members were interested only in their pay packets. Most had initially supported Wilson's and Heath's union reforms; as early as 1971, some 68 per cent even thought that their leaders' behaviour was 'a threat to the prosperity of the country'. Many were almost Thatcherites in embryo: a poll in January 1975 found that two-thirds of union members opposed further nationalization, while a survey of manual workers found that 82 per cent endorsed the profit motive, 86 per cent agreed it was important to live in a free-enterprise society and 89 per cent thought it was fair to pay dividends to shareholders. For most people, Taylor remarked, the point of having a union card was not to gain entry to some socialist paradise but 'to gain tangible rewards', from a foreign holiday to a new kitchen. Younger workers were accustomed to the fruits of affluence; what they wanted from their union was not so much the New Jerusalem as a new Cortina.<sup>10</sup>

And while Conservative editorials thundered about the dangers of unchecked union power and Labour ministers bent over backwards to give them whatever they wanted, more perceptive observers could see that change was in the air. The 'forward march of labour', warned the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm in the autumn of 1978, was coming to a halt. The days of working-class solidarity, he thought, were over: under the pressures of affluence and individualism, the labour movement had broken up into competing 'sections and groups, each pursuing its own economic interest irrespective of the rest'. On the left, his analysis provoked a hail of criticism. But in the last months of the decade events would prove him devastatingly right.<sup>11</sup>

In 1964, when Harold Wilson had first become Prime Minister, much of Britain had still been desperately poor. Wandering across the industrial landscape in the year of that first victory, the travel writer Geoffrey Moorhouse had chronicled with horrified fascination the world of the 'other England' a country where millions of people ate and slept in conditions that would have seemed familiar to their great-grandparents; where thousands of elderly people lived alone in conditions of damp, darkness and utter isolation; where more than 3 million households lived without baths, inside toilets and hot running water. Yet by the time Wilson returned to Number 10, the life of the other England had changed almost beyond recognition. Reshaped by affluence and technology, Britain was now, wrote an American reporter, a much 'cleaner, sunnier, brighter place in which to live'. In 1964, fewer than one in ten households boasted central heating; by 1974, almost half of all homes were centrally heated. In 1964, only one in three households had a fridge; by 1974, it was more like nine out of ten, and many had bought freezers, too. Half of all households had a telephone; about half had a car, and



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