

The Conservative Governments 1951-64

The history of the long 'fifties offers a number of themes:

- Suez
- Butskellism: the post-war consensus and its critics
- The end of austerity and the rise of the consumer society
- The 'land of lost content' and the last years of the 'government of chaps'
- Social change, including mass immigration, youth culture and the end of deference
- The Winds of Change, losing an empire and failing to join the EEC

In essence, one might argue that the Attlee governments created a post-war consensus. Arguably, that consensus held good in all the key areas of national life until the 'seventies and the coming of Margaret Thatcher. What were its primary elements?

We must also come to consider the notions of the 'British disease', and that of national decline. We must consider the actual decline in British power in the world, and the end of empire. We must also look at Britain's relative economic decline (though never forgetting that this was an era of near record economic growth), and of some underlying economic problems. What caused the British disease? What did the government do, or fail to do about it? Could they have done differently?

WHY WERE THE CONSERVATIVES SO DOMINANT IN THE 1930s?

This was an era of Conservative electoral dominance. They won in 1951 by a hair's breadth, but won again in 1955 and in 1959 they won a majority of 100; 1964 was very close. They were in power for 13 years

Why did the Conservatives recover after 1945?

Use **Flagship**, pp 55-60

- Outline just how bad the defeat was in 1945. Explain why their 40% vote a silver lining in the very dark cloud
- Remember that the Conservatives victory came via two general elections: the narrow defeat of 1950, and the narrow victory of 1951.
- Explain how Lord Woolton led the recovery of the party machine, and how a new generation of Conservatives emerged
- Show how policy was developed, and a new language to rival Labour's. In particular, why did ideas like a 'property owning democracy' resonate? Why did the likes of the *Industrial Charter* and housing matter? How did the Conservatives reassure voters that they were not going to dismantle much of Labour's reforms?
- What was the significance of Labour's 'age of austerity' and the costs of post-war reconstruction and the welfare state?
- Did the early cold war have an influence?
- The elections of 1950 and 1951 are hard to analyse, but there were key advantages to the Conservatives after the redrawing of boundaries. They also benefitted from larger swings in key marginals, and from yet further Liberal decline in 1951.

The Politics of the Conservative Governments

Use **Flagship**, pp 60-63

There were four PMs:

- Churchill 1951-55: the 'government of national nostalgia', Churchill's health and the new Elizabethans
- Eden 1955-56: Suez

There is a **blog article on Eden**:

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2017/09/18/the-fates-of-eden-a-political-tragedy-in-one-act/>

- Macmillan 1959-63
 - Pt 1, 1956-60: Supermac, 'You've never had it so good' and 'Winds of Change'
 - Pt 2, 1960-63: The Establishment, Scandal, the economy and Europe

There are **two blog articles on Macmillan**:

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/06/06/tory-leaders-we-have-known-harold-macmillan-part-one/>

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/06/07/tory-leaders-we-have-known-harold-macmillan-part-two/>

- Home 1963-64

There is a **blog article on Home**:

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2017/06/15/tory-leaders-we-have-known-alec-douglas-home/>

Is it fair to say this was a period of contentment, or instability and decline? Or both?

Economic Policy in the 1950s

Use **Lynch**, pp21-23, pp 31-36, p 40

Central to this argument was the viability of Keynesianism, the idea of Butskellism and consensus, and the mixed economy. There was, in the end, there was no serious attempt to deal with the underlying problems of the British economy. Instead, economic policy was determined more by Stop-go.

Make sure you have an understanding of

- Keynesianism
- Stop-go
- Bretton Woods
- Balance of Payments
- Inflation, deflation, Stagflation
- Growth rates
- Productivity
- Deflationary budgets; fiscal policy
- Real wages

The most famous of Macmillan's words on the economy are usually rendered as 'Never had it so good'. Read the excerpt from his speech (**Lynch, p 34**). The issue was, how sustainable was the growth of the 'fifties, or was Britain paying itself more than it could afford?

- Explain what was meant by Bustkellism. How fair is the term?
- Upon becoming chancellor in 1951, Butler was persuaded by the Treasury to argue for a radical change in economic policy. ROBOT would have seen Britain abandon Breton Woods and float Sterling, and would have needed sharply deflationary fiscal policy. Churchill and the cabinet rejected ROBOT. What does this tell us about the economic policy of Churchill's government?
- Keynesian economics implied Stop-go. However, each time there was a go, there would soon be a run on the pound requiring a deflationary budget. Most of all, they were unable to resist the temptation of vote winning giveaway budgets before elections in both 1955 (Butler) and 1959 (Heathcoat-Amory). In both cases those had to be followed by sharply deflationary policies. In 1963, Reginald Maudling's 'dash for growth' left the 1964 Labour government with an economic and financial crisis.
- Growth rates in Britain were slower than almost every major western economy
- Up until 1957, unemployment remained very low. However, after that it rose. We now had the beginnings of stagflation.

For all that, this was a period of rising living standards, and the start of a great consumer boom
Use **Flagship pp 216-19** as well as Lynch

- End of rationing
- Rising real wages
- HP
- Housing boom ('property-owning democracy')
- Consumer boom

Read **Flagship, pp 208-12**

In the end, the British economy under the Conservatives did have underlying problems:

- The rise in real wages, without a commensurate rise in productivity
- Levels of industrial investment were too low and, as in the case of R & D, too skewed to defence
- Industrial relations were poor
- Sterling was overvalued, and balance of payments crises were a constant (in part a consequence and cause of stop-go)

Furthermore, the Conservative governments failed to tackle those problems, preferring short-term political advantage:

- Churchill had a small majority, and was not inclined to take difficult decisions (remember, austerity had done Labour serious political damage. Therefore, once ROBOT was killed off, Butler stuck to stop-go)
- Labour had opinion poll leads in 1952, in 1957, and very large ones from 1961-64
- Giveaway budgets prior to elections proved too tempting to resist for both Butler (1955) and Heathcoat Amory (1959), both of whom had go into reverse immediately after; likewise, Maudling's 'dash for growth'. The interests of party were put before country
- After Butler, chancellors came and went: Macmillan had four
- Attempts to develop an industrial strategy were half hearted, notably the NEDC (Neddy)

- Attempts to control rising incomes were similarly ineffective in the private sector, notably the NIC (Nicky). Selwyn-Lloyd's 'pay pause' only really affected the public sector
- High levels of defence spending (notably on the nuclear deterrent) , and commitments abroad, skewed the British economy towards defence

Were these, as Labour claimed, 13 wasted years?

British Society and Social Policy Under the Conservatives

It is probably fair to say that these Conservative governments were both reforming and still small-c conservative (something they had in common with Attlee's Labour), though the next Labour government would be more liberal. It is probably fair to say that the cliché of the conservative 'fifties and the permissive 'sixties is somewhat misleading in both cases, but has some truth in it. Nor should we forget the importance of the coronation in 1953 and the respect and affection in which the monarchy was held by most people. Britain was still a broadly stable and small-c conservative country in the 'fifties.

Use **Lynch, pp 37-45**

- Education:
 - The pressure to move from the Butler model of grammar and secondary modern schools to comprehensives
 - The role of Robert Boyle, local and backbench resistance to change
 - The Robbins Report
- Ideas of class, social mobility and the establishment
- Immigration
 - The symbolism of the SS Empire Windrush & the coming of black and Asian immigration
 - The rise of racial tensions
 - The Notting Hill riots (1958) & others
 - The Commonwealth Immigrants Act, 1962
- Youth culture: Teddy Boys, mods and rockers, rock and roll
- Popular culture: the rise of TV, cinema, radio, newspapers (use **Flagship, pp 226-31**)
- Culture: the Angry Young Men, the satire boom, the Lady Chatterley Trial, the Beatles

Foreign policy

There are separate questions on foreign policy, but you should be aware of these key issues

- The impact of the Cold War: Korea, nuclear weapons & defence, the USA and the 'special relationship' (**Flagship pp 134-44**)
- The significance of Suez (**Flagship pp 137-39**)
- The 'Winds of change': the end of empire (**Flagship pp 105-16**)
- Britain missing the European boat (**Flagship pp 176-82**)
- Macmillan's attempt to join the EEC (and its domestic political significance) (**Flagship pp 176-82**). There is also a blog article **here**
<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2016/02/20/britain-and-europe-1-these-old-men-and-a-non/>

Labour 1951-64

One reason for the Conservatives domination was the state of Labour

Use **Flagship, p 38; Lynch pp 57-61**

- Attlee stayed on as leader until the 1955 election
- Internal divisions between Gaitskellites and Bevanites
- The 1959 election
- The unilateralism debate and the defeat of the left

Why did the Conservatives lose the 1964 general election?

The 1964 general election is another that repays careful scrutiny of the actual results. There is a **blog article on the election**

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/05/18/the-1964-general-election-reconsidered/>

Also use **Flagship, pp 63-67**

- The Establishment and the old guard; the satire boom and cultural change
- Economic problems after 1959
- The failure of EEC entry
- The Night of the Long Knives
- Scandal: Vassall, Philby & the Third Man, the Argyll case (the 'headless man') and, most of all, Profumo Affair (and Boothby)
- Macmillan's departure and Alec Douglas Home
- Gaitskell's victory over the Labour left; Harold Wilson and the 'white heat of technology'
- The Orpington by-election and the recovery of the Liberals

FURTHER READING, LISTENING & VIEWING

Sixth form history needs you to do reading of your own. Already, this guide had given you references to the Flagship textbook, and some other resources. You need to take steps beyond that both online and, of course, by resorting to another revolutionary technology, the book. For modern British history, there is a dizzying array of printed and online resources, of startlingly variable quality. If you do find something not on here that's good, let the rest of us know through the Facebook page or email s.tilbrook@rgs.newcastle.sch.uk and we'll add it.

For each topic or area, we have colour coded each book or article:

➤ **Blue is essential**

➤ **Yellow means if you want to develop a deeper understanding you should read one or all of these**

➤ **Green means this is a monograph, or a sophisticated or highly detailed account. Learn how to dip into real history books, a vital study skill; you might sometimes find full books actually become more engrossing**

➤ **Pink is for choices that are more loosely related, and have grabbed someone's interest at some point. Try one or two, they might be fun**

A WORD ABOUT ONLINE RESOURCES

Three of the best resources are, of course, the History department's very own Blog, Facebook page and Twitter feed.

The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (DNB)

Beyond that, for the British history course, get used to using one of the best resources available, and for free; the DNB. Any local library card will get you in: anyone can join the City Library via this link <https://eforms.newcastle.gov.uk/popup.aspx/RenderForm/?F.Name=JVpTDqdaf2o> Once you have a library card number, got to <http://www.oxforddnb.com/> and fill in your number, or the city one you need to go via their portal. You then have access to it all. They vary in quality from the good to absolutely excellent, and they are all written by leaders in the field. The best have a particularly good last section, dealing with how history has viewed these men and women, and their historiography. There are also the **Themes**.

History Today

Beyond that, another invaluable resource is **History Today**. We have institutional access to the entire archive, here: <http://www.historytoday.com/user/login>

Username: Tilbrook

Password: historian

You can search at your leisure, and find all sorts. These guides will flag some up for you.

Philip Allan Resources

Another good resources is Philip Allan Magazines Online, aimed very much at sixth-form students: here <http://my.dynamic-learning.co.uk/default.aspx?ReturnUrl=%2farchive.aspx>

Username: j.richardson@rgs.newcastle.sch.uk

Password: rgs1

The archive is then searchable

There is a range of series aimed at sixth form history students. None make for exciting reading, and they vary in quality, but you should always aim to read at least one.

Michael Lynch, *Britain 1945-2007 (Access to History)* (2nd ed, Lon 2008)

Malcolm Pearce & Geoffrey Stewart, *British Political History 1867-2001* (3rd ed, Lon 2002)

Here are some other overviews:

John Charmley, *A History of Conservative Politics 1900-1996* (Lon 1996)

A breezy account from a Conservative point of view, highly opinionated and very much focused on party politics

Chris Wrigley (ed), *A Companion to 20th Century Britain* (Oxford 2003)

Peter Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900-1990* (Lon 1996)

TO Lloyd, *Empire, Welfare State, Europe: English History 1906-92* (4th ed, Oxford 1993)

Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had it So Good* (Lon 2010) is the most readable

Peter Hennessy, *Having it So Good: Britain in the 'Fifties* (Lon2007)

Martin Pugh, *State & Society: Britain 1870-1997* (2nd ed, Lon 1999) Pt IV

Episode 2 of *Andrew Marr's The History of Modern Britain* on the 1950s is probably the best <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oElRPbbobM>

The DNB entries on Eden, Butler & Macmillan are essential, but others are also worth a look

There are [blog articles on the prime ministers, chancellors, home secretaries and foreign secretaries of the Conservative years](#). You can find them all here:

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/british-outlines/>

On [Eden as foreign secretary](#):

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/04/23/the-foreign-secretaries-10-sir-anthony-eden/>

And [in general, and as prime minister](#):

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2017/09/18/the-fates-of-eden-a-political-tragedy-in-one-act/>

On [Macmillan in general, and as prime minister](#):

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/06/06/tory-leaders-we-have-known-harold-macmillan-part-one/>

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/06/07/tory-leaders-we-have-known-harold-macmillan-part-two/>

As [foreign secretary](#):

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/06/13/the-foreign-secretaries-14-macmillan/>

And [chancellor](#):

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/06/14/the-chancellors-18-harold-macmillan/>

On [Home in general](#):

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2017/06/15/tory-leaders-we-have-known-alec-douglas-home/>

And as [foreign secretary](#):

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/06/20/the-foreign-secretaries-16-alec-douglas-home/>

On [Rab Butler in general and as chancellor](#):

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/06/11/the-chancellors-17-rab-butler/>

And as [home secretary](#):

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/06/18/the-home-secretaries-20-rab-butler/>

And [foreign secretary](#):

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/06/18/the-home-secretaries-20-rab-butler/>

On [Selwyn Lloyd as foreign secretary](#):

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/06/13/the-foreign-secretaries-14-selwyn-lloyd/>

And as [chancellor](#):

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/06/21/the-chancellors-21-selwyn-lloyd/>

You can read about [Macmillan's other chancellors, starting with Peter Thorneycroft](#):

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/06/15/the-chancellors-19-peter-thorneycroft/>

And [Derick Heathcoat-Amory](#):

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/06/19/the-chancellors-20-derick-heathcoat-amory/>

And [Reginald Maudling](#):

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/06/27/the-chancellors-22-reginald-maudling/>

And about the other [Conservative home secretaries, starting with David Maxwell-Fyfe](#):

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/06/08/the-home-secretaries-18-david-maxwell-fyfe/>

Gwilym Lloyd-George:

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/06/12/the-home-secretaries-19-gwilym-lloyd-george/>

Sir Henry Brooke:

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2018/06/26/the-home-secretaries-21-sir-henry-brooke/>

Peter Hennessy, *The Prime Ministers* (Lon 2000)

Ben Vessey, Anthony Eden (2008)

<http://www.historytoday.com/ben-vessey/anthony-eden>

There is a review of David Dutton's biography, by Robert Pearce

<http://www.historytoday.com/robert-pearce/anthony-eden-life-and-reputation>

There is a review of Anthony Howard's biography of Rab Butler, by David Lipsey

<http://www.historytoday.com/david-lipsey/rab-life-ra-butler>

A review of Edward Pearce's *Lost Leaders*, covers the failures of Butler, Lord Hailsham (aka Hogg) and Iain MacLeod to become PM

<http://www.historytoday.com/robert-pearce/lost-leaders-best-prime-ministers-we-never-had>

DR Thorpe, Harold Macmillan (2011)

<http://www.historytoday.com/dr-thorpe/harold-macmillan>

Alan Hodge, *The Macmillan Years* (1963)

A contemporary verdict

<http://www.historytoday.com/alan-hodge/macmillan-years>

A review of the second volume of Macmillan's diaries, by Richard Weight (2011)

<http://www.historytoday.com/blog/2011/11/macmillan-diaries-vol-ii-prime-minister-and-after-1957-1966>

The style of government and the impact of scandal are covered in the blog

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/03/03/the-government-of-chaps-schools-spies-and-sex-scandals-in-post-war-britain/>

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2014/12/20/mandy-rice-davies-the-greatest-sex-scandal-of-them-all/>

There is a brilliant Michael Cockerell documentary on the Night of the Long Knives

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yEwpKCXirC8>

The 1950 and 1951 elections are covered in these blog articles:

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/02/08/the-general-elections-of-1950-and-1951-part-one-2/>

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/02/09/the-general-elections-of-1950-and-1951-part-one/>

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2017/04/22/snap-elections-we-have-known-1923-1931-1951-1966-and-1974-october-oh-yes-and-2017/>

Tides of History covers the 1955 election:

<https://tidesofhistory.wordpress.com/2017/05/26/1955-traitors-red-tories-and-the-most-boring-election-of-all-time/>

There is also a blog article on Macmillan's EEC application

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2016/02/20/britain-and-europe-1-these-old-men-and-a-non/>

The history of council housing is covered in these blog articles

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/02/26/a-brief-history-of-the-council-house/>

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/03/05/a-brief-history-of-the-council-house-2-great-estates-and-concrete-fetishists-i-have-known/>

In particular, housing in the 'fifties is covered here

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/02/27/the-houses-that-mac-built/>

And the new towns

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/02/26/newtown-neurotic/>

Popular culture in the 'fifties is also covered on the blog

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/03/10/hail-hail-rock-and-roll/>

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/02/05/frank-sinatra/>

Then there is the story of British food and the most famous April Fool of them all

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/04/01/the-most-famous-april-fool-spaghetti-in-1957/>

And coronation year is on the blog here

<https://rgshistory.wordpress.com/2015/02/24/coronation-year-1953-and-my-best-friends-dad/>

Robert James, Anthony Eden and the Suez Crisis (1986)

<http://www.historytoday.com/robert-james/anthony-eden-and-suez-crisis>

Timothy Benson, Suez 1956 (2006)

<http://www.historytoday.com/timothy-benson/suez-1956>

There is a BBC documentary on Suez

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ETOUALw2EIs>

As a bonus, here's the great comedian Peter Cook reprising his *Beyond the Fringe* Macmillan in 1986

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ocMUBZ8eIDs>