

TSUDA COLLEGE
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CONTEMPORARY BRITISH SOCIETY

Week 9

THE 1953 CORONATION: THE JUBILEE OF 2003, AND ROYALTY IN BRITAIN TODAY

STUDY THE READINGS BELOW. IS BRITAIN A BETTER PLACE TO LIVE IN THAN IT WAS IN 1953? HOW HAS THE POSITION OF ROYALTY CHANGED?



THE CORONATION OF QUEEN ELISABETH II, 2ND JUNE 1953

Then and 50 years later

Basic income tax rate	1953: 47.5%	2003: 22%	2016 20% (£11-43k)
Police officers	1953: 73,248	2003: 131,548	2015 126,818
Road fatalities	1953: 5,090	2003: 3,450	2013 1,713
Average weekly working hours	1953: 44.95	2003: 37.2	2016 43.6
Average weekly wage	1953: £5 2s/5d	2003: £465	2013 £517
Unemployment	1953: 380,000	2003: 936,900	2016 1.68 million
Population	1953: 53,327,333	2003: 58,789,194	2013 64.1 million
Births (per thousand)	1953: 15.9	2003: 11.4	2011-2015 11
Deaths (per thousand)	1953: 11.4	2003: 11.3	2011-2015 9
Marriage	1953: 395,316	2003: 286,100	2012 262,240
Divorce	1953: 28,347	2003: 156,800	2015 130,473 (Lowest for 40 years)
Bank base rate	1953: 4%	2003: 3.75%	2016 June 0.50%
RPI* inflation rate	1953: 2.5%	2003: 3.1%	1.6% March 2016
*Retail Price Index			
\$=£ Exchange rate	1953: \$2.80	2003: \$1.66	£1 = \$1.44 = ¥154.37 2016 June
Dow Jones index	1953: 290	2003: 8,851.2	17,807.06
Cigarettes smoked daily	1953: 10.1(men) 3.3 (women)	2003: 15 (men) 13 (women)	2014 12.2 (men) 10.5 (women)

Reading 1: Facts and figures from 1953 and 2003

READING 2. BRITAIN, 1953: SO LONG AGO, SO FAR AWAY

Vernon Bogdanor

[The Observer](#) 1st June 2003

'The past is a foreign country,' L.P. Hartley famously remarked. 'They do things differently there.' Britain in 1953, Coronation Year, certainly seems like another country, one barely recognisable today. It was a time of optimism and self-confidence, hopeful of what the future might bring.

Years of Hope was the title that Tony Benn, then known as Anthony Wedgwood Benn, gave to his volume of diaries of the Fifties. I once asked him why. The Conservatives, after all, had been in power for most of the decade. His reply was revealing. 'We had won the war, created the Welfare State, nationalised the major public utilities, expanded education, begun the process of decolonisation, put in place a structure of collective security. There seemed nothing that we could not achieve.'

On Coronation Day itself, 2 June 1953, it was announced that Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay had conquered Everest. Keith Holyoake, acting Prime Minister of New Zealand, declared that Hillary had put 'the British race' as well as New Zealand 'on top of the world'.

Sir Robert Menzies, Prime Minister of Australia, had been fond of referring to himself as 'British to his bootstraps'. Being an Australian or New Zealander was just another way of being British, a citizen of the mother country. Such sentiments may have been strong in the seven self-governing dominions. They may have been less fervent in the 39 colonies and protectorates whose government was the responsibility of the Colonial Office. The first African colony, the Gold Coast, did not achieve independence, as Ghana, until 1957.

In 1953, however, the crowning of the young Queen seemed to many final proof that history would not deal with Britain as it had dealt with those other empires that had enjoyed their brief moment on the world's stage. 'The Country and the Commonwealth,' declared Dr Geoffrey Fisher, Archbishop of Canterbury, had, on Coronation Day, been 'not far from the Kingdom of Heaven'.

It was hardly surprising if many saw the Coronation as inaugurating a new Elizabethan Age. The Queen, however, was eager to distance herself from such aspirations, and, in her 1953 Christmas broadcast, confessed she did 'not feel at all like my great Tudor forbear - who ruled as a despot and was never able to leave her native shores'.

The Coronation was, *The Times* remarked, a 'holiday from reality', its very success contributing to a mood of complacency which made it so difficult for Britain to adjust to the postwar world. The Government in 1953 was presided over by the aged

Churchill, then in his seventy-ninth year. He was still able to summon up his energies for a great occasion but hardly equal to the daily toil of the modern premier ship. Harold Macmillan was to complain that Cabinet met at 11am to be treated to a tour d'horizon from Churchill of such length that the first item on the agenda was not reached until noon.

The Prime Minister was devoting his failing energies to trying to secure a summit conference with the post-Stalin Soviet Union, a project opposed both by his Cabinet and by the Americans; and to desperate attempts to prevent decolonization.

The Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, was negotiating the independence of the Sudan and the withdrawal of British troops from the Suez Canal Zone. Churchill was opposed to both and would telephone Tory backbencher Julian Amery to say he agreed with the rebels.

The European Coal and Steel Community, precursor of the European Community, which Britain had decided not to join, was about to celebrate its first anniversary. Few in Britain noticed. It was indeed a holiday from reality.

Ministers, many of them Churchill's wartime cronies, spent much of their time wondering how they could persuade their leader to retire. George VI, before his sudden death in 1952, was himself intending to raise the matter with his Prime Minister.

The problem was aggravated in the month of the Coronation, when Churchill suffered a stroke, which he was not expected to survive. All this was hidden from the public while the country was in effect led for some months by Christopher Soames, Churchill's son-in-law and Parliamentary Secretary, and John Colville, his Private Secretary.

In those more leisurely days, Churchill was able to avoid making any public speech between May and October without people being aware that he had been seriously ill. A year later, Harold Macmillan was to complain in his diaries that 'Churchill is now often speechless in Cabinet; alternatively, he rambles about nothing'. It is difficult to avoid concluding that he was, by this time, quite incapable of governing.

All this meant the radical reappraisal Britain so badly needed failed to take place. Ministers still saw Britain as one of the 'Big Three', almost on a par with the United States and the Soviet Union. This was hardly good preparation for a world in which Britain would have to fight to secure influence on the Continent, let alone the wider world. Ministers should have heeded the words of Sir Henry Tizard, the Government's former chief scientific adviser, who had said in 1951: 'We are not a great power and never will be again. We are a great nation, but if we continue to behave like a great

power we shall soon cease to be a great nation. Let us take warning from the fate of the great powers of the past, and not burst ourselves with pride.'

In the event, decolonisation, despite a few hiccups, was carried through more smoothly and peacefully than many would have predicted in 1953. For the Empire had always meant more to the governing elite than to the people. Ministers cared that Britain should remain a great power with a seat at the top table. It is doubtful if the people shared their priority.

That no doubt is how we managed to avoid the traumas of the French in Algeria, the Portuguese in Africa or the Belgians in the Congo. 'I could defend the British Empire,' Churchill commented ruefully towards the end of his life, 'against anyone except the British people.'

The Commonwealth now has 54 members, one-third of the world's independent states, with a population of nearly one and half billion people, around a quarter of the world's total. It is an entirely voluntary organisation, and since almost all of the ex-colonies have chosen to join, it marks a genuine transformation from a relationship based in 1953 on domination to one in 2003 based on the sovereign equality and independence of states.

In 1953, the governing elite not only dominated other peoples abroad, it also sought to dictate to its own people at home. The Lord Chamberlain's office still censored plays, objecting in 1957 to the line in John Osborne's play, *The Entertainer*, 'those playing fields of Eton have really got us beaten'. Literature, too, was censored and people were not allowed to read D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* until 1960, following the rejection of the desperate plea of Mervyn Griffith-Jones, acting for the Crown, that it might not be a book one would wish one's wife or servant to read.

Homosexuality was illegal in 1953, and public attitudes to it were primitive and uninformed. As late as 1963, the *Sunday Mirror* provided for its readers a two-page guide, 'How to Spot a Homo'. The main signs were, apparently, 'shifty glances' and 'dropped eyes', but the clincher was alleged to be 'a fondness for the theatre'.

The Britain of 2003 lacks the self-confidence and optimism of 50 years ago. It is a more realistic and disenchanting place, and is far from being an ideal society or even a society that is, in John Major's words, 'at ease with itself'.

And yet, today's Britain is a much better place than the foreign country that celebrated the Coronation: a far-away country to which no one of sense would wish to return.