



Leadership and Change: Prime Ministers in the Post-War World - Macmillan

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Thank you, David, for your kind remarks. I'm very honoured that the grandson of Harold Macmillan should be in the chair this evening, and it's very kind of David to take time to come and do this.

At one minute before ten o'clock, on the evening of the General Election, on Thursday, the 8th of October 1959 (for polling in those days ended at nine o'clock) the High Sheriff of Essex stepped outside the counting hall in Billericay and announced in record time the first result. Billericay was of double significance. Not only was it the first seat to be declared, as it had been in 1955, but it was then regarded by sephologists as the archetypal constituency, a demographic microcosm of the entire country, and thus the most accurate pointer to the eventual outcome. In the General Election of May 1955, the overall Conservative majority under Sir Anthony Eden had been 60 seats - with the Billericay majority, just over 4,000 votes. The figures declared at Billericay that evening in October 1959 showed that the Conservative candidate had won the seat with an increased majority of just under 5,000 votes.

Although 629 seats, in those days, were still to be declared, when Hugh Gaitskell - the Labour leader of the Opposition - heard the figures from Billericay, as the chimes of Big Benn sounded at the start of the radio and television election results programmes, he said to his closest aids, "We've lost by 100 seats." When the final result was declared from Orkney and Shetland at Saturday lunchtime, Gaitskell's prediction was fulfilled. Harold Macmillan had led the Conservatives to victory, with an overall majority of exactly 100. It was the greatest political triumph of Macmillan's career, the equivalent moment for him to that on the afternoon of the 29th of June 1919, when King George V, abandoning protocol, greeted Lloyd George at Victoria Station on his return from the signing of the Versailles Peace Treaty, and drove with him in an open carriage to Buckingham Palace, handing him a laurel wreath.

For Macmillan, it was all a far cry from that day in 1957, in the wake of the Suez crisis, when he had been invited by the Queen to form an administration and had warned Her Majesty that his Government in all likelihood would not last six weeks. In fact, his time as Prime Minister was to last six years and nine months, and in terms of the changes that Britain experienced in those dramatic years, it proved one of the most formative and influential of the post-War era, its ramifications still with us today. In short, it was a premiership that made a difference.

The Macmillan years from 1957 to 1963, under the ever-present shadow then of the Cold War, were characterised by several important political initiatives. First and foremost, there was the rebuilding of the Anglo-American relationship after Suez, and this for Macmillan was a priority accomplished by skilful use of his close wartime association with Eisenhower in North Africa. The great mistake in dealing with the Americans, Macmillan believed, was to treat them as though they were Anglo Saxons. Like Henry James, a Macmillan publishing author, he knew what was absent from the texture of American life. No state in the European sense of the word, as Henry James wrote in his essay on 19th Century American civilisation, and indeed, barely a specific national name – no sovereign, no court, no aristocracy, no diplomatic service, no castles nor manors nor old country houses, no cathedrals nor abbeys, no Oxford, no Eton, no Harrow, no Epsom, no Ascot. But Macmillan knew, like Henry James, that a good deal remained, and was more

adept at understanding that specific American character than many of his political contemporaries. After all, like Churchill, he had an American mother.

As a result, in his years in Number 10 Downing Street, and temporarily in Admiralty House when Number 10 was being renovated, Macmillan ensured significant British support for the United States at key moments, such as the Berlin crisis in 1958 and the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, whilst the United States supplied Polaris, ensuring Britain a place at the nuclear top table.

Secondly, belated steps were taken to apply for membership of the European Economic Community, an attempt unsuccessful initially to atone for the lost opportunities of the Messina Conference in 1955. Macmillan was not alone in finding De Gaulle more difficult to deal with - The Impossible Ally, in the title of Dr Peter Mangle's forthcoming study of the relationship. Not for nothing did Macmillan describe De Gaulle as "possessing all the rigidity of a poker without its occasional warmth"!

Thirdly, Macmillan presided over the second post-War phase of the ending of Empire, a process of decolonisation, hastened by sympathetic colonial secretaries, such as Ian McLeod and Reginald Maudling, however unpopular this made them or Macmillan with Conservative backwoodsmen. Churchill, for one, as we heard on Vernon Bogdanor's lecture on Churchill, was horrified by the "Winds of Change" speech which Macmillan made in South Africa in 1960.

Fourthly, Macmillan in his Disraelian guise presided for most of his premiership over a period of economic stability, full employment, and a vast improvement in the condition of the people. In his famous Crystal Palace speech of 1872, Disraeli proclaimed that the people of England would be foolish if they should not have long perceived that the time had arrived when social and not political improvement is the object which they ought to pursue. It was not a mistake Macmillan was to make between 1957 and 1963.

At the time of the 1959 election, The Times observed: "People are prosperous, prices are steady, unemployment is low." Only when the economic climate deteriorated in 1961 and '62 did the political tide begin to turn and the troubles begin. Macmillan's antennae were so finely attuned that he was one of the first to see the unsustainability of much of this material progress, as shown in his infamously misinterpreted Bedford speech of July 1957 about the British "never having had it so good." "What is beginning to worry some of us," he actually warned, "is, is it too good to be true, or perhaps I should say, is it too good to last?" On May the 28th, 1962, he admitted to his Cabinet that his dream of keeping in the air the four balls of full employment, stable prices, a strong Pound, and a balance of payments in surplus, was doomed to failure.

Enoch Powell has famously written that "All political lives, unless they are cut off in mid-stream at a happy juncture, end in failure, because that is the nature of politics and of human affairs." In retrospect, the 8th of October 1959 can be seen as the moment when Macmillan's political life began a slow, almost imperceptible, descent from its achieved peak, through spectacular political terrain, no doubt, and with moments of skilful technical achievement in traversing myriad difficulties, but inexorably ending in the mundane base camp of a hospital bed in the King Edward VII Hospital, an outcome announced to the public at 9.41pm on the 8th of October 1963, almost four years to the exact minute since he had won 49.4% of the public vote in the 1959 General Election.

Despite such important developments as the rapport Macmillan struck up with Eisenhower's successor as American President, the youthful John F. Kennedy, and lasting achievements such as the Test Ban Treaty in the summer of 1963, the period after the 1959 Election was characterised by reversals in different forms, "The events, dear boy, events," that Macmillan saw as defining political activity and response. These included such diverse and damaging moments as the collapse of the Paris Summit in the summer of 1960, the Orpington by-election of March 1962, the Night of the Long Knives in July 1962, when Macmillan sacked seven Cabinet ministers, and in January 1963, the death of Hugh Gaitskell, which brought Harold Wilson to the leadership of the opposition, and De Gaulle's veto of the British application to join the EEC. 1963 also saw the report of the Vassall spy tribunal in April, which led to the imprisonment of two journalists for refusing to disclose their sources, and the Profumo scandal in June 1963.

Though sensationally seized upon at the time, the Profumo scandal, far from hastening the end of Macmillan's premiership, actually prolonged it. If the Profumo affair had not blown up, Macmillan might well have resigned in the summer of 1963, an option he was considering with increasing seriousness, in which event his successor would almost certainly have been the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Reginald Maudling, thus avoiding many of the controversies of the infamous Blackpool Conference of October 1963, when Lord Dylan, the Lord Chancellor, canvassed opinion, in Rab Butler's vivid phrase, "like a large Clumber Spaniel sniffing the bottoms of the hedgerows".

The Vassall tribunal was actually far more damaging than Profumo, as it turned the press inexorably against the Macmillan Government, and thereafter no opportunity of hounding Macmillan personally was missed. By comparison, the satirical outpourings of *Beyond the Fringe*. Macmillan loved Peter Cook's impersonation of him of the famous *Globe Sketch* and *That Was the Week that Was* were affectionate. He specifically warned his Postmaster General not to order the BBC to withdraw TW3 from its schedules, as he said, "It was far better to be mocked than to be ignored."

Macmillan's career, like Churchill's, therefore, has its elements of the steeplechase. What set it apart from those of most of his peers is that Macmillan had to wait an inordinately long time for one of the great offices of state. Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain, both relatively late starters in high politics, had to wait twelve and five years respectively from entering Parliament for such preferment to one of the great offices. Macmillan had to wait thirty-one years. To be right before the War on both the key issues, unemployment, and the appeasement of Nazi Germany, and to be articulate in his criticisms was not the quickest way to the inner governing circles of his Party. When told that Jeffrey Dawson, Editor of *The Times*, supported Chamberlain's appeasement policy, Macmillan observed, "The Times is always wrong, and every twenty years or so, publishes the next volume of its official history to demonstrate the fact."

Eden, whom he succeeded as Prime Minister in January 1957, was actually three and a half years his junior, yet had had twenty years of experience in the great offices of state on retirement, against Macmillan's then twenty months. As a result, one of Macmillan's defining political characteristics was that of, if not an old man in a hurry, then an experienced man making up for lost time. Inevitably, this meant taking risks, being willing to gamble.

"To succeed pre-eminently in English public life," observed Malcolm Muggeridge, "it is necessary to conform either to the popular image of a bookie or a clergyman," and he had in mind Churchill and Lord Halifax. Macmillan undoubtedly belongs to the former category, just as surely as, say, Attlee belongs to the latter. In fact, if one looks at the first ten post-War Prime Ministers, from Attlee through to Major, it is interesting to note, thanks to Wilson's two spells, that Downing Street is occupied alternately by a clergyman, starting with Attlee, then a bookie and so on, from 1945 right up to 1997, when of course Blair becomes not so much the exception that proves Muggeridge's rule, but its complete validation as a bookie masquerading as a clergyman!

One can hardly imagine, going back to the first parson, Attlee, allowing, or Sir Stafford Cripps being willing to introduce premium bonds, which so enraged Archbishop Fisher in 1956, after Macmillan's only Budget. He thought it was gambling, it was just a voluntary abandonment of the interest in the hope of more interest. Nevertheless, Attlee regarded Macmillan as the most radical politician he had ever encountered, and once claimed that, "Had it not been for the War, Macmillan would have ended up by leading the Labour Party."

Macmillan's relations with Archbishop Fisher, who had clashed with the Government over Suez in 1956, tell us much of his political style. When Fisher retired from Lambeth Palace in 1960, he was dismayed to learn, in the manner of retiring Archbishops, that the Prime Minister was not intending to appoint Fisher's favoured successor to Canterbury, the Bishop of Bradford or, failing him, the Bishop of Peterborough, but in fact Michael Ramsay, then Archbishop of York. In an unavailing late attempt to change the decision, Fisher called on the Prime Minister. "Dr Ramsay," he pronounced, "is a theologian, a scholar, and a man of prayer, therefore he is entirely unsuitable as Archbishop of Canterbury!" adding, as what he hoped to be the final coup de grace, "I have known him all my life. I was his Headmaster at Repton." "Thank you, Your

Grace, for your kind advice,” replied Macmillan. “You may have been Dr Ramsay’s Headmaster, but you are not mine.”

In fact, educational similes feature prominently in Macmillan’s political vocabulary. Budget day he said was “rather like speech day: a bore, but something one had to get through.” After his creation of life peers in 1958, he said that the newcomers were like “day boys” and when anti-Etonian sentiments were aired with ever-increasing frequency – this happened even before the days of Gordon Brown – Macmillan observed, “Mr Attlee had three old Etonians in his Cabinet. I have six. Things are twice as good under the Conservatives.”

As befitted a publisher, literary reference abounded too. Over the appointment of Michael Ramsay to Canterbury, Macmillan said, “I rather enjoy patronage. I take a lot of trouble over it. At least it makes all those years of reading Trollope seem worthwhile.” Allusions to Dickens also proved useful code, as references to, say, Pecksmith or Uriah Heep, left a sense of uneasiness among those so described, as not all knew their Dickens as well as Macmillan and may not have been sure whether they were being complimented or castigated.

Many factors contributed to Macmillan’s complex personality and approach to politics. I first met him on St George’s Day 1975 at Birch Grove, with the daffodils in full bloom, when he had willingly agreed to help me with my research into my first book. He shuffled to the door, for all the world like Chekhov’s aged retainer, in a Sussex production of *The Cherry Orchard*, and took me through to the book-lined study. On the table, was a copy of his family firm’s recent publication, Robert Skidelsky’s *Life of Oswald Mosley*. “Of course,” he said, indicating the book, “for all his brilliance, Mosley never grasped one essential point about the British people: they will never vote for extremism. Recollections of Mosley’s memorandum, the New Party, and the battle between economic orthodoxy and economic unorthodoxy in the 1931 financial crisis poured forth, and the past lived again.” Then he paused. “But of course, you’re not here to talk about all that! How can I best help on your book?”

I told him I was writing on those uncrowned Prime Ministers of Conservative Party history, Sir Austin Chamberlain, Lord Curzon, and Rab Butler, all of whom he had known, and all of whom had attained the penultimate, but not the expected final rung in the political hierarchy.

“Oh, I see,” he said, after a pause, “kind of failed BAs!” before adding, “Of course if you want to make it a more amusing book, you could always have a fourth section on George Brown.” Then for two hours, the recollections poured forth.

Later that year, when I interviewed Rab Butler, he asked me in a slightly querulous manner whether I had spoken to Macmillan. When I confirmed, or perhaps admitted, that I had, he said, “And how was he that day? Was he the crofter’s great-grandson, or the Duke of Devonshire’s son-in-law?” The truth is that he was both, and more, but in this lay the appeal he had for much of the British electorate for so long.

Macmillan may have been a political bookie, but he was also an intellectual, the first and only premier since Balfour who could be so described. His life was full of such contrasts, radical yet traditional, gownsman yet swordsman, classicist yet populist – the list is endless. This was one of his political strengths in winning power: he appealed to so many different constituencies. He knew that politics is a vulgar business. He had an intuitive feeling for what appealed to the electorate and for the way in which power operated. He once said that his son, Maurice, had not got as far in politics as he should have because he was not ruthless enough.

As Eden was preparing to bow out of the Foreign Office, prior to entering Number 10 in the spring of 1955, Churchill asked him, as Eden recorded in his diary, how he had got on with Harold Mac in Paris : “I said, ‘Very well. Why?’ Churchill replied: ‘Oh he is very ambitious!’ I laughed.” Macmillan himself often said that as an older man he posed no threat to Eden’s position. At such moments, Eden’s friends advised him to start counting the spoons!

Harold Macmillan understood the machinery of government and how to crank it into action. He was competitive and knew that in politics one had to be a salesman. It was not, in the mid-20 th Century (was it ever?) a gentlemanly profession, which is why he was always so assured when facing Gaitskell, whom he once described as a “sanctimonious Wicamist with gestures like an Armenian shop keeper”. So much more wary and respectful when facing Harold Wilson across the despatch boxes: “No one is given the keys to Number 10 on a velvet cushion,” again a political truth Macmillan and his successor, Alex Home, understood intuitively.

The list of those to whom Macmillan appealed was a remarkably broad cross-section of British society: the deferential working class, who thought in those far off days that the governing class knew their business, and that it was best to let them be about it; to the military veterans, who admired his great war record, in an age when MPs who had seen active service were referred to in the House of Commons as “Honourable and Gallant Members”; the aspiring lower middle class, who wanted their children to have educational opportunities denied to themselves in pre-War days; the Rotary Club members in his Bromley constituency, who thought him the last British Prime Minister who actually looked like a Prime Minister; the left of centre Keynesian economists who saw him, with his deficit financing and authorship of the Middle Way, not only as one of themselves, but also one with the political will and acumen to achieve manageable fiscal expansion; the intellectuals and university world, who admired his undoubted intelligence and seriousness, or at least the Oxbridge world. He once asked one of his Cabinet members, a bemused alumnus of the London School of Economics, if he had had a Sligger Urquhart!

The business world, which respected his years of commercial experience, was another constituency, and in particular, Disraelian One Nation Conservatives, who wanted Tory men and Whig measures, and who agreed with him that Toryism has always been a form of paternal socialism; the literary world, who were in reverence of his personal links with Hardy and Kipling; the religious community, who saw him as second only to the Queen in his loyalty and devotion to the Church. Reading the lesson each Sunday at St Giles, whenever in Sussex, his successive private secretaries had instructions to let the vicar know if he was unable to read the lesson, otherwise it was taken for granted that he would.

The patriots, who applauded his unambiguous pursuit of British interests, and the ease with which he discomfited a shoe-banging Khrushchev at the United Nations; the internationalists, who appreciated his shrewd acceptance of the second phase of decolonisation; the aristocrats, who saw him as one of their own, though he had married into the aristocracy rather than being an aristocrat in himself. Of the maze of Chatsworth, he once said one had to throw a double six to find the way out! Only when he had seen off a Cecil in 1957, in the shape of Robert of Salisbury over Archbishop Makarios and the Cyprus question, did he feel he had finally come to terms with the aristocracy.

In essence, he remained a Scottish bourgeois, as he knew himself. He had an acute sense of placement. Macmillan described Lord Home, the 14 th Earl, in his Tuesday Memorandum to the Queen in October 1963 on the Tory leadership, as “a right down regular peer”, whereas Lord Hailsham, the 2nd Viscount, “like officers who had risen to fill the gaps in the Great War”, he described as “a temporary gentleman”. He thought Herbert Morrison “a third rate taminy boss and a Cockney guttersnipe”. Selwyn Lloyd, he described as “a middle class lawyer from Liverpool”, and the Cabinet Secretary, Norman Brook, a former pupil of Wolverhampton Grammar School, as “having no background”. Ironically, though the denizens of Chatsfield and Hatfield never knew it, on Friday evenings at Downing Street, before leaving for a weekend at Birch Grove, Macmillan actually took high tea first, as it was convenient and saved time before braving the rush hour traffic, something which Harold Nicholson would no doubt have regarded as very bedint.

Napoleon once said that to understand a man, “one had to know what was happening in the world when he was twenty”. The fact that Macmillan was born in 1894 tells us so much. He was thus twenty when he went into the trenches, one of the survivors of that Lost Generation and the ghosts of Oxford, from which university he said he was “sent down by the Kaiser”.

In Britten’s opera, Owen Wingrave, the pacifist hero in one of the great lyrical outpourings in opera sings of how “in peace I have found myself”. With Macmillan, it was the exact opposite: it was in war, both on active service in the Great War, and in high executive position in the Second War in North Africa, that he found

himself. Some of the most harrowing and moving documents in his papers are the letters he sent home to his mother from the trenches, some still bearing bloodstains, and one, after an injury to his hand, in stubby pencil markings, which somehow adds even more to the intensity of what he recalls. The Macmillan trustees have allowed me to read out this extract from an unpublished letter of the 30th of August 1915.

“Dear Mother,

Do not worry about me. I am very happy. It is a great experience, psychologically so interesting as to fill one’s thoughts. A company has just passed my house, back from a long route march, singing wonderfully the dear soldier songs, with silly words and silly tunes, but which somehow seem, sung by their great childish voices, from the depths of their very lovable hearts, the most delicate music and the most sublime poetry. Indeed of all war, I think the most interesting, and humbling too, experience is the knowledge one gets of the poorer classes. They have big hearts, these soldiers, and it is a very pathetic task to have to read all their letters home. Some of the older men, with wives and families, who write every day home, have in their style a wonderful simplicity, which is almost great literature. It is all very touching. Indeed, I think there is much to be learned from soldiers’ letters.”

Coupled with his experience of pre-War unemployment in Stockton-on-Tees and his three years with Dame Evelyn Sharp at the Ministry of Housing, Macmillan thus had insights into the experience of what Lord Falconer calls “ordinary people” that was virtually unparalleled among his political contemporaries. In *Culture and Society*, an influential book published in the first year of Macmillan’s premiership, Raymond Williams observed that “The fact that the working classes aspire to the material comforts taken for granted by the middle classes did not of itself mean that they also wanted to become middle class.” Macmillan understood this. He never had the Puritan’s high-minded distain about improving material standards. Scarred by his experiences of pre-War and pre-Welfare State Stockton, he knew all too well the alternatives. Living under the flight path of Gatwick Airport at Birch Grove, he judged the noise pollution, an accurate indicator of economic activity. In the summer of 1959, one of his grandsons noted complainingly the incessant drone of aircraft taking off for the Continent. Macmillan told him this was an auspicious sign: “the people would have good holidays, they would come back happy, and in the autumn, they would return the Conservatives to power in the General Election,” and so they did.

He showed similar wisdom with the old. At one of the degree ceremonies over which he presided as Chancellor of Oxford University in the 1960s, an angry crowd of protesting undergraduates threatened havoc as Macmillan led the procession of University grandees from Wadham to the Divinity School. “It will be all right if we get past the King’s Arms,” said Macmillan reassuringly to Alan Bullock alongside him. “You see, they’ll rush us as we pass the King’s Arms. It was the same in the First War: the dangerous spots were always the crossroads.”

If the first problem of politics is how to win power, the second and more difficult is what to do with that power once it has been won. Macmillan’s solution was to choose wise lieutenants, of whom three outside the Cabinet in particular were of seminal importance: Michael Fraser, Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party, and as a former Director of the Conservative Research Department, his link with Rab Butler; Freddie Bishop, his Principal Private Secretary; and John Windham, at whose Petworth Estate many crucial decisions were considered and finalised.

It was to Michael Fraser that Macmillan sent his celebrated memorandum asking to be told on a single sheet of paper exactly what it was the middle classes wanted, and then he would see whether they would be given it.

Bishop was his rock at many moments of crisis, notably the aborted Paris Summit in 1960, when Macmillan chose to take Bishop with him to his last meeting with Khrushchev in the hope of averting breakdown. “This is government by Private Secretary,” complained Selwyn Lloyd, the excluded Foreign Secretary, as

Gladwin Jebb, the British Ambassador in Paris, fumed alongside him. “Well, the only alternative is government by politician,” replied Bishop insouciantly. Macmillan appreciated such calm.

Despite his reputation for unflappability – “Quiet, calm deliberation disentangles every knot” was the famous notice he placed on the Cabinet door, the original of which he gave to Bishop on his retirement – Macmillan was a pack of nerves on public occasions, whether it was presenting the prizes at his preparatory school, Summerfields in Oxford, or addressing the United Nations in New York. At such times, he took comfort in recalling Raymond Asquith’s words at Balliol: “Whatever happens, remember that the sun will still rise over Wadham and set over Worcester.”

John Windham was an especially trusted courtier, unpaid, discreet, loyal, the epitome of Bagehot’s dictum that “Sensible men of substantial means are what we wish to be governed by.” On his 1958 tour of the Commonwealth, Macmillan was introduced to an old bedraggled peasant in a model village at New Delhi. “This is one of the largest landowners in this district,” he was told by his Indian hosts. Introducing John Windham to the man, he said, “And this is one of the largest landowners in my district!”

John Windham was by his side too at one of the unrecorded moments of Cold War public relations. The space race was then one of the prizes of Cold War supremacy. Initially, the Russians seemed to be the victors, with the Sputnik in 1957 and then Leika the dog was successfully sent into space, before finally Uri Gagarin became the first man to orbit the Earth. When Gagarin visited England in July 1961, there was much talk in Cabinet about the appropriate level of royal hospitality. Should it be a state banquet at Windsor? But Khrushchev in 1956 had only been given tea at Windsor. Perhaps a visit to the Queen Mother at Clarence House? The royal diary was very full at the time, and it was a sudden request. Finally, Gagarin was invited to one of the Queen’s regular Buckingham Palace lunches, fellow guests including Bud Flannigan of the Crazy Gang and Lord Mountbatten.

Afterwards, Gagarin was driven down the Mall to see Macmillan at Admiralty House, where the Prime Minister was then living whilst Downing Street was undergoing renovations. The Foreign Office came up with a special Rolls Royce, registration number YG1, and Gagarin drew vast crowds, waving Union Jacks and Russian flags, as his cavalcade with outriders made its slow progress through the cheering throng. London was en fete. Macmillan watched the noisy spectacle from an upper window in Admiralty Arch. “Of course,” he observed to John Windham, “it would have been far worse if they had sent the dog”!

The public response to the Gagarin visit showed an underlying sense of uncomplicated respectfulness that was still strong then in British society. By 1963, the social climate was very different. Addressing an American audience in retirement, Macmillan drew a biblical parallel to illustrate the contrast: “Do not worry too much,” Adam is reported to have said to Eve as they left the Garden of Eden, “we live after all, my dear, in an age of transition.” “And of course,” added the aged Earl of Stockton, “we always do.”

All ages of history have their elements of transition, but the six years of Macmillan’s premiership saw crucial changes in so many areas of public life. The introduction of life peerages in 1958 was to have profound and, at the time, unforeseen effects on the constitution. Dubbed “day boys” at the time by Macmillan and the hereditary peers, the life peers were eventually to take over the whole school.

The Preston by-pass, opened in 1958 as the first section of motorway in Britain, was to be the harbinger of a complete change in road transport, just as the American style steakhouses revolutionised high street eating habits.

On one occasion, Macmillan, Lord Salisbury and Roy Strong had been invited to dine with Lady Diana Cooper, but found on arrival that Lady Diana had confused the dates and given her cook the evening off. Undaunted, they set off on a search for food, alighting eventually on an Angus Steakhouse. For Macmillan, it was a revelation, and a gratification, that people could walk in off the Edgware Road and partake of such an excellent, first class meal, and the evening was accounted a great success, except by Lady Diana Cooper, who did not think that the wine list amounted to much!

Such social changes, as memories of the age of austerity faded, were one of the defining qualities of the Macmillan years. Gastronomically, for instance, 1957 was still largely a world of Brown Windsor soup. By 1963, specialist shops were marketing silver crème brûlée hammers.

Politically, Macmillan was a realist. He knew four years before Dean Acheson famously said that Britain had lost its empire and failed to find a role that he was operating in an age of re-adjustment, which is why joining the EEC became such an important priority, and in the end the failure to do so such a damaging and fatal political moment. “The dinosaur was the largest beast, but it was inefficient and therefore disappeared,” Macmillan said in one speech. “The bee is efficient, but it is too small to have much influence. Britain’s most useful role is somewhere between bee and dinosaur.” So, like Churchill and Eden, Macmillan maintained the belief in the concept of three interlinking circles – America, Europe and the Commonwealth – with Britain a crucial constituent of each component. In his Manchester speech of 1972, Disraeli said, “The very phrase “foreign affairs” makes an Englishman convinced that I am about to treat of subjects with which he has no concern.” Macmillan knew that well-ordered international relations were crucial to national security, but from an electoral point of view, he understood the primary importance of next Friday’s grocery bill. Foreign policy may have been his passion and economics his hobby, but he knew that economics would determine political success.

In his own brief spell as Chancellor of the Exchequer, Macmillan would have liked to have brought in a full-scale Capital Gains Tax but was not then confident enough to take on both the Inland Revenue and his own Party. Ironically, the stagnation that accompanied Macmillan’s time at the Treasury was the price that had to be paid for Butler’s boom. It was not a pattern he wanted repeated by his own Chancellors.

The defining figures in his premiership were therefore not grandees such as Salisbury, Lord Kilmauir or Lord Dylan, but his four Chancellors of the Exchequer, who successively resigned, acquiesced, fell and flourished. They are the true measuring points of his years in Downing Street.

Peter Thorneycroft was Chancellor from 1957 until his sudden resignation in January 1958 over the levels of public expenditure, on the eve of Macmillan’s departure for his Commonwealth tour, when he was succeeded by the safe, stopgap figure of Derek Heathcote Amory. In two long meetings at Pepworth in the summer of 1960, Macmillan persuaded Selwyn Lloyd to take up the burden. This experiment ended in the tears of the Night of the Long Knives on Friday, the 13th of July 1962.

Only with the appointment then of Reginald Maudling did Macmillan have a Chancellor who was committed like him to Keynesian expansion and the dash for growth. After De Gaulle’s EEC veto in January 1963, Maudling’s success was even more crucial to the survival of the Macmillan and subsequently Douglas-Home Governments. The last 15 months of Macmillan’s premiership was therefore economically a crucial watershed in post-War politics, the moment when inflation became institutionalised as a method of paying for the growing demands of a socially conscious electorate.

Of Macmillan’s four Chancellors, the two most similar were Thorneycroft and Selwyn Lloyd, in that both wanted to impose severe financial constraints and, as a result, finally fell afoul of Macmillan, ironic in that Macmillan’s own spell as Chancellor was far from expansionist. Macmillan cut public spending by £100 million in his only Budget. After a moderate Budget in the spring of 1957, Thorneycroft had to deal in September with a Sterling crisis and run on the Pound. Thorneycroft responded by raising the bank rate from 5 to 7%. Thorneycroft relied on Enoch Powell, his Financial Secretary, and Lionel Robins for economic advice. Both believed that control of the money supply would curb inflation, a view Thorneycroft, a converted monetarist, came to share, and thus a moment of immense long-term significance for British politics in the final third of the 20th Century. Macmillan relied more on Roy Harrod’s advice, and invariably sent Harrod’s sceptical letters to Thorneycroft: “The idea that you can reduce prices by limiting the supply of money is pre-Keynesian.” Thorneycroft’s eventual resignation on the 6th of January 1958 was famously dismissed by Macmillan, about to depart on his Commonwealth tour, as “a little local difficulty”. It was far from that and, in the longer term, can be seen as one of the first important stirrings of what later became known as Thatcherism.

With his aeroplane waiting on the Heathrow runway, Macmillan had to move very quickly and, as a result, took the decision to promote Derek Heathcote Amory from Agriculture to the Treasury, as the only means of avoiding a major reshuffle. The appointment of Amory, whom Macmillan thought rigid and not over-clever, was essentially a holding operation, though Amory proved willing to finance inflation whilst at the same time claiming that there was no departure from previous policy. By October 1958, even Roy Harrod was warning Macmillan: "I have an uncomfortable feeling that all the excellent things you achieved in the past few months will still not add up enough to prevent a serious growth in unemployment in the time ahead." Amory did not want to stay in politics in the long term, and once the 1959 Election was successfully surmounted, Macmillan turned to thoughts of major reconstruction.

In the summer of 1960, he moved Selwyn Lloyd from the Foreign Office to the Treasury, a fateful decision for both men, for Selwyn Lloyd proved less pliant than Macmillan anticipated, and when economic difficulties arose in 1961, there would be only one eventual outcome. Macmillan was primarily concerned with the political consequences of his Chancellor's policies, whereas Lloyd, to his credit, continued to be preoccupied by the economic consequences. Reflecting after his dismissal, with six other Cabinet Ministers, on the evening of the Night of the Long Knives, Selwyn Lloyd recorded that Macmillan's biggest mistake was thinking unemployment a worse enemy than uncontrolled inflation.

Selwyn Lloyd's misfortune was to become Chancellor as the inflationary pressures began to mount. The pay pause he had introduced in the sharply deflationary July measures of 1961 was particularly unpopular with nurses and teachers, who had a large measure of public support, and contributed to a series of by-election reverses for Macmillan's Government, the most spectacular being the Orpington By-Election of the 14th of March 1962. Orpington entered the political vocabulary as a symbol of the rebellious, disenchanted commuter and his wife, as the financial pressures began to mount.

A remarkable play, now sadly neglected, premiered on the 16th of May 1962, midway between Orpington and the Night of the Long Knives. It encapsulates perfectly the contemporary mood of middle-class financial disenchantment. Everything in the Garden by Giles Cooper is set in an ordinary suburban Home Counties house, somewhere on the A3 between Surbiton and New Malden. Everything in the garden seems lovely, but it is far from so. The pressures of maintaining former standards of living are seemingly insurmountable. School fees are rocketing, the car needs changing, and the bank manager is calling in the overdraft. There seems no way out of the impasse until, almost by accident, the bored housewife finds herself offered afternoon work in a discreet, high class London brothel, where she soon begins to earn vast sums of money. On the first night, the sounds of the seats flipping up as people left at this moment was like rifle fire! By turns black comedy and high fantasy, the play takes a tragic turn, but at the end, money and outward respectability remain the driving motive. "The garden of the house," says the housewife "must be kept up. We can't afford to let it go. You notice them from the train, the gardens that people have let go. You know at once there's something wrong in that house. Ours must look like all the others, don't you think?"

In Britain in 1962 and '63, people had grown accustomed to wanting everything in the garden to look lovely. Maudling was the man whose job it was to provide the wherewithal by his economic policies after Orpington and such related reversers to realise that goal. So, Maudling's brief from Macmillan was to be as unlike Selwyn Lloyd as possible: in short, to finance an expansionist programme to curb unemployment. This proved easier in theory than practice, and initially Maudling was cautious in his approach, but he was in a stronger position than Amory or Lloyd in that Macmillan was increasingly preoccupied with battalions of other political sorrows. One Cabinet meeting was even taken up with examining and considering photographs of Members at one of the Duchess of Argyll's lush parties, and he could hardly sack another Chancellor after the events of July 1962.

That Was the Week That Was became less cosy. One sketch after Maudling had met a delegation of the unemployed ended with the Chancellor saying as he left, "Well, I've got work to do even if you haven't."

By July 1963, however, unemployment had fallen below 500,000 and as Macmillan's other myriad difficulties increased, Maudling was seen by many as his most likely successor. The French veto on Britain's EEC application had left the Government directionless, a difficulty skilfully exploited by the new

Labour leader, Harold Wilson, relishing his role as leader of the Opposition, and the press were baying for blood after the Vassall tribunal and the imprisonment of the two journalists. The visit of the young American President John F. Kennedy to Birch Grove in June gave some respite from domestic problems, and showed Macmillan the statesman, once more confident on the international scene, but it was illusory. Before the autumn leaves had turned, Macmillan had resigned, and Kennedy was dead by an assassin's bullet. Thereafter, Macmillan always wrote to Kennedy's widow, Jackie, on the anniversary, the 22nd of November.

One of the great mysteries about the last months of Macmillan's premiership is why Maudling did not succeed him in Number 10. A certain raffishness counted against him in some circles, epitomised when he arrived at an evening function at Downing Street sporting a light blue velvet dinner jacket, which he thought the glass of fashion, until Macmillan greeted him with the words, "Ah Reggie, playing the drums at the 100 Club again tonight, I see!" But what really did for Maudling was the Profumo scandal.

Macmillan could hardly resign at the height of that furore, yet had he departed in the summer of 1963, as he had been seriously considering, Maudling would have been the strongest of all the candidates. At that moment, that list could not have been included, in Anthony Howard's phrase, "Mr Home and Mr Hogg", Lords Home and Hailsham, as the Peerage Act, allowing existing peers to disclaim their titles, did not come into force until the 31st of July. Yet in some strange way, Maudling let the ball slip from his hands.

For a start, the Profumo affair spurred Macmillan into renewed and determined action, and he expected other Party workers to react likewise. Central Office, at his instigation, sent a message to all approved candidates for the next Election reminding them, as they went out to canvas countrywide, of G.K. Chesterton's approach to a pre-War speaking visit to a Northern town: "Looking forward to meeting you," telegraphed the host mayor, "Brass band will meet you at station." "Brass band unnecessary," replied Chesterton, "am bringing own trumpet."

The last months of Macmillan's premiership nevertheless had important consequences. In international affairs, the Test Ban Treaty was a lasting achievement, though the legalistic performance of Lord Hailsham at the negotiations in Moscow so annoyed the American delegation, and in particular Avril Harriman, that Macmillan was warned at the time of his resignation that if Hailsham succeeded him as Prime Minister it would mean the end of the Special Relationship.

Life peerages now became a relevant factor in the resolution of the Tory leadership crisis. Two false myths still persist about that dramatic month: firstly, that Macmillan, according to the account of it thence given by Ian McLeod in his Spectator article, had been determined from the first to deny Butler the succession and had even falsified the result of soundings to the Queen to achieve that aim; and secondly, that in the initial absence of his regular doctor in the Lake District, Macmillan regretted resigning almost as soon as he had done so, as his prostate condition proved to be benign. Yet Rab Butler was never going to get the Tory leadership in 1963. He knew it, and thought the eventual outcome was hard to bear, nothing Butler did could have altered it. He had been told by John Morrison, Chairman of the influential 1922 Committee, in the summer of 1963 that "the chaps won't have you", and shortly afterwards, as Maudling told me in 1975, one day, as he left his Hans Place apartment, by chance he had met Butler in the street, and after some small talk, Butler, taking him by the arm, had said, "Of course I would be very happy to serve under you, Reggie." When Lord Home was attempting to form his Cabinet, he told Maudling that if he, Home, failed in forming a Government, the Queen would send for him, Maudling, not Butler. The most damaging point that McLeod made in his article, however, was actually a less regarded one towards the end of the article: "We have confessed that the Tory Party could not find a Prime Minister in the House of Commons at all." Macmillan's advice to Home was that if McLeod persisted in this line, Home should say that it reflected ill on the profession of journalism that they could not find an editor of the Spectator from within its own ranks, but it had to resort to choosing Ian McLeod!

In October 1963, as Macmillan prepared for surgery at the King Edward VII Hospital, the thoughts of the summer returned. The game was no longer worth the candle. His time had passed, and 1963 had proved, in Bill Deed's words, "a horse carrying more lead than he could manage." Alec Baddenoch, son of the surgeon who operated on Macmillan, recorded that the histology of the prostate showed benign

hyperplasia, and Macmillan was aware of this fact. At no time was he encouraged to resign by his medical attendants, and indeed, when he did resign, he expressed great relief that he had reason to leave the political crises which he faced, and he termed this an act of God. To those who attended him in the aftermath of his operation, including his Parliamentary Private Secretary, Sir Marcus Cunningham, who recorded all these details in his important, but, yet unpublished, memoirs, "Macmillan's decision to resign came to me as a relief. He was at ease in his mind, saying that he'd been looking for a way out, and that events really might have been providential."

Nevertheless, all Conservative leadership contests since that in October'63, including the present one, have been directly influenced by the Party's experience at that traumatic time, both in the codifying of changing rules and the manner in which these rules have been implemented.

The Royal Prerogative too has changed irrevocably. As both the major parties elect their leader now, it would be difficult to imagine circumstances in which the Queen would not accept the decision of the governing party at a time of vacancy, confirming as her First Minister the accepted, democratically chosen leader of the party commanding a majority in the House of Commons. Again, it was very different from January 1957, when the Queen did ostensibly have a genuine choice, though she was happy to be guided by the advice of those she consulted. In October'63, it was made quite clear by the Palace from the start that the procedure to be followed was what was described as "you choose, we send for."

In his letter of resignation to the Conservative Party Conference in Blackpool, Macmillan hoped that the customary processes for choosing a new leader would now begin. In fact, there were no customary processes. That was part of the difficulty. In the future, there were.

Macmillan's twelve years in Cabinet, from 1951 to'63, spanned an era of profound change in British society, a period comparable to the transformation of society in the early Victorian years, with the advent of the railways. 1951, despite the green shoots implicit in the Festival of Britain, was still largely a world of rationing, reserve, and radio news. By 1963, consumerism had replaced food coupons, popular culture was the complete antithesis of reserve, and television gave a new immediacy to global news.

For an Edwardian, Macmillan adapted to the challenges of the television age brilliantly, "that deep probing eye" as he described the camera, just as Baldwin had used the wireless so effectively in his day, and Macmillan regular retrospects with Robert McKenzie, on the occasion of the publication of each of the six volumes of his memoirs, became unmissable television events. Both Macmillan and Baldwin understood that although mathematically they were speaking to a potential audience of millions, actually, they were speaking to a small family unit, a skill which Harold Wilson also exploited so effectively.

Macmillan's premiership was the link between the age of austerity and the age of affluence, which it did so much to bring into being, but at long term cost. "This long run is a misleading guide to current affairs," Keynes famously remarked. "In the long run, we are all dead." For monetarists therefore, Macmillan will always be the spectre at the feast, and during the Thatcher hegemony his name was not revered, especially when ennobled as the First Earl of Stockton.

His sense of nonagenarian mischiefness remained undimmed. "First of all, the Georgian silver goes, and then all that nice furniture that used to be in the saloon," he observed of privatisation, "and then the Canelettos go." The critique proved, as he intended, very damaging. "The image of Ministers," wrote Thatcher's biographer, John Campbell, "like a lot of dodgy house strippers knocking down the nation's heirlooms at a cost well below their true worth subtly undermined Mrs Thatcher's carefully created reputation for thrifty housekeeping." As a businessman, Macmillan knew it was against all the rules of economic husbandry to spend the proceeds of such asset stripping on consumption not investment, yet, looking at the overall sweep of history, Macmillan had helped to pave the way for Thatcher, and for other developments that could not possibly have been seen in the time: devaluation, a belated entry into Europe, the Winter of Discontent, and the rise of monetarism in fiscal policy, which in its turn led to the demise of old style socialism to Tony Blair and New Labour.

So, when the High Sheriff of Essex declared the Billericay result that October evening in 1959, he was not only announcing a Conservative victory in an individual seat, and for the overall result itself, but marking the beginning of a new phase of British politics. Macmillan had exorcised the memories of Suez, and in the preferred phrase of our current Prime Minister, “he had drawn a line under the past and could now move on.” Whether, as he moved on, Macmillan presided over the acceleration of eventual decline, is a problem that will probably exorcise economists rather than political historians, for their science is more measurable.

Whatever the ultimate verdict though, Macmillan will always remain one of the most individual, subtle and beguiling of Prime Ministers, and a constant attraction for those who make a study of what Stanley Baldwin lovingly called “the endless adventure of ruling men.”

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