Chapter Sixty-Five

TWO UNCERTAIN DECADES

FOR the majority of the population peace meant going back to normal and by normal they meant 1914. Few recognised that the war had made such a return impossible. So much had changed that the clock could not be put back. The desire to do so inhibited the pressing need to move forwards to a world which was changing faster than ever before. Democracy as a means of running a country was to prove both a means of accelerating change but also of impeding it. In 1918 the Franchise Act, responding to the post-war mood of expectancy, gave the vote to every man over twenty-one and every woman over twenty-eight, thus trebling the electorate to 22 million. Ten years later the age qualification for women was equalised, thus adding five million more to the electorate. The vote ceased to be a privilege bestowed upon those deemed to have a vested interest in the state and became a birthright. After 1918 the working classes could tip the electoral balance decisively one way or the other for the first time. Bidding for the votes of this vast new electorate began to be the dominating factor for all political parties. In response to this the parties not only developed their inherited Victorian party machines, but also embraced the new media, first the mass circulation newspapers and then, in the mid-1920s, broadcasting. Naturally such an electorate welcomed advantageous social reform. What it did not warm to was government action which brought home sharp truths. In some ways, therefore, a democracy was more difficult to handle and a less effective means of government than the monarchical and aristocratic systems which had preceded it. Henceforward a government could only do what public opinion would tolerate.

This fact soon emerged during the two decades which spanned the end of the First World War and the beginning of the Second in 1939. Already, after two centuries of expansion caused by the world's first Industrial Revolution, decline and decay had set in. It had begun earlier in the case of agriculture during the 1870s: by 1938 only 4.2% of the workforce remained on the land. But after 1918 it became far more

work in the twentieth century, however, had the vote and could therefore no longer be ignored. But the effect across the country was by no means uniform, rather made up of a series of isolated pockets of misery in places like Northern Ireland, Clydeside, the north-east and Lancashire. Nor was every part of the industrial landscape cast into darkness, for the inter-war years witnessed the rise of the south-east with a whole new range of industries: motor car manufacture, machine tools, electrical appliances, aircraft and the new synthetics like plastic and artificial silk. The trouble was that no one would come to terms with the fact that the old industries were in terminal decline.

Nor did governments respond to what these new industries called for, a far better-educated workforce. Instead there were twenty years of official inertia following the raising of the school leaving age to fourteen in 1918. There it was to remain, in spite of a major report recommending that it should be raised to fifteen in 1926. That was to be implemented in 1939, but the war intervened. This failure in education policy sprang from a fear that if the working classes were educated they would not want to work hard at long boring jobs. Indeed, it was believed that it would erode their will to work at all. And, again looking backwards, their education would only exacerbate the servant problem for the upper classes.

The idea that a government should be involved in industry at all, let alone have an economic policy, was still a novelty in the 1920s. After the war everyone believed that all that was called for was the restoration of sound currency by returning to the Gold Standard (measured by an exchange rate for the pound of $4.86); properly balanced budgets and a free market would do the rest. As for a slump, the only way out of that was to cut government expenditure. That actually did not square, as it produced further unemployment which called for more state money in the form of benefits. As the inter-war years passed governments opted more and more for protectionism, defending, through the introduction of tariffs, the home market. This not only marked the end of the long reign of free trade but also something else of significance: the state was becoming progressively more involved in the running of the economy, an activity which was to continue in an ever-ascending curve.

That involvement had begun during the war when government had been forced to take over whole areas of the economy for the first time, anticipating what was to happen after 1945, nationalisation, which lay in the future, but the seeds were already there, sown, ironically, by the Conservatives. In 1926 the government acquired the British Broadcasting Company making it into a Corporation which was in effect a state monopoly. In the same year the Central Electricity Board was established with the aim of providing a nation-wide power grid. Both proved to be precedents upon which to build.

But what was to propel such a notion right into the centre of the arena was the arrival of a new political party for whom the nationalisation of the means of production was to be a fundamental tenet. The meteoric rise of the Labour Party and the equally catastrophic descent of the Liberals was to be the greatest political phenomenon between 1918 and 1939. The speed with which Labour assumed a position as the official opposition and then went on to hold office in what was a new two-party system can only be described as astonishing.

The Labour Party's roots lay back in the previous century. Until the 1880s the unions had remained not only diverse but divided; although they may have harboured the odd politically motivated revolutionary group their concern had been with trade and craft protection. The change came with the advent of a new type of union, the bulk of whose membership was unskilled, but who collectively, through strikes, could hold an urbanised and industrialised society to ransom. During the same period there also emerged intellectual groups who were to provide the ideological framework for such a new party. In 1881 the Democratic Federation was formed, inspired by the teachings of Karl Marx and dedicated therefore to the destruction of capitalism. Three years later they merged with another group, the Labour Emancipation League, to form the Social Democratic Federation. In the same year, 1884, Sidney and Beatrice Webb founded the Fabian Society whose message was nationalisation: 'The emancipation of Land and Industrial Capital from individuals and class ownership, and the vesting of them in the community for general benefit.' The Fabians tended to be armchair visionaries, certainly not revolutionaries, an attribute they shared with movements in the arts, like that led by William Morris, who yearned for a return to the worker-craftsman living in a romantic medieval utopia. The general drift of all these groups was to replace profit-mongering capitalism with collective ownership and co-operative management of the means of production and distribution.

Until the 1890s working class voters had supported the Liberals, but in 1891 a particularly bitter strike triggered the emergence of an independent labour political organisation with links to the Fabian Society. A year later three of their members, including Keir Hardie, were elected MPs, and in 1893 the Independent Labour Party was born. Keir Hardie was a self-taught socialist thinker who found himself leading what was in the early days a small, poor, and weak party but one whose objectives were to become those of the future parliamentary Labour Party, and were radically to affect the direction of the country and of society for much of the century. They proposed a long list of social reforms including the abolition of overtime, piecework and child labour, the introduction of an eight hour day, benefits for the sick, disabled,

old, widowed and orphaned, as well as unemployment benefit. They also demanded a further extension of the franchise, the abolition of indirect taxes, the 'taxation, to extinction, of unearned incomes', and a 'graduated income tax'. The most important clause of all was Clause 4, which called for the state 'to secure the collective ownership of all the means of production, distribution and exchange'.

The failure of the Liberals to respond to many of these currents within working class aspirations heralded their eventual demise. By 1895 there were six hundred Labour councillors and in 1898 there was the first Labour local authority. But any real bid for political power called for far wider support and for finance, which only arrived when Labour became allied to the trades unions. In 1899 the Trades Union Congress voted to increase the number of Labour MPs and the next year set up a Labour Representative Committee. The real change, however, followed a legal judgment in 1901, the Taff Vale judgment, which laid down that funds of a union could be drawn upon if its officials were found liable in an action brought for damages. Suddenly a hundred and twenty unions decided to affiliate themselves to the Committee and the unions proceeded to instigate a political levy on their members to finance its MPs.

In 1903 the Liberals entered into a secret agreement with Labour, promising, in return for Labour's support of certain Liberal measures, a free hand in thirty constituencies. In the 1906 Parliament there were thirty MPs who took for the first time the name of the Labour Party. The Liberals reversed the Taff Vale judgment in the Trade Disputes Act. When a judge in 1909 ruled that unions should not make use of funds to finance MPs, the Liberals reversed this in the Trade Unions Act of 1913, which went on to sanction the collection of a political levy. But although the Labour Party travelled far, even in 1918 it was still a minority.

Meanwhile the Conservative Party had managed to adapt to the new democratic age in a way which was also to hasten the demise of the Liberals. The trebling of the electorate in 1918, far from being a disaster, ushered in an era of Conservative victories. Although Prime Ministers like Lord Salisbury had regarded the arrival of democracy with horror, by 1918 the Conservative Party was well on the way to becoming the party of the ever-burgeoning middle classes of suburbia. Nor did it lack working support in places like Liverpool and Birmingham. All in all, the Conservatives had succeeded in adapting to the twentieth century with remarkable ease. The party had ceased to be the party of the landed gentry and became instead one dominated by business and industry. Unlike the Labour Party, it had no driving ideology, preferring to present itself simply as efficient government of a kind which defended property rights, stood up for conventional morality, and cultivated

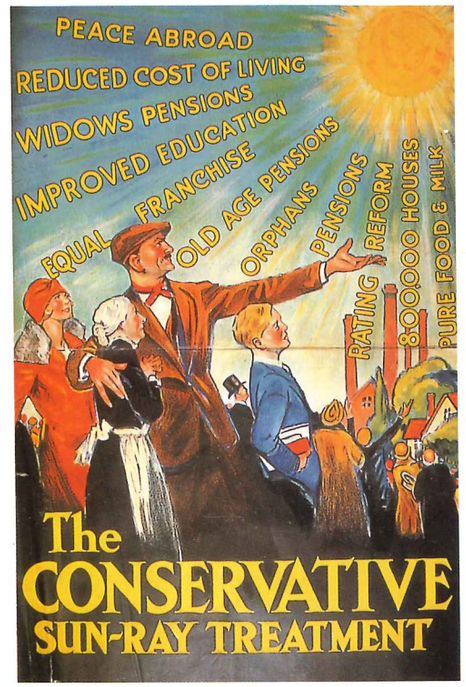
patriotism to king and country. Conservatism abhorred any socialistic idea of a gigantic redistribution of wealth and, as the excesses of the Russian Revolution became known, drew to its ranks those who feared any form of Bolshevism securing a foothold in Britain.

The war had ended with a Coalition Government in power, headed by Lloyd George, which went to the country and was returned. After an initial flurry of commercial activity there followed an horrendous slump, producing massive unemployment. The coalition broke up, and in 1922 there was another election, the results of which began to spell out the collapse of the Liberals, for the party was split between those who were loyal to Lloyd George as against those who still adhered to Asquith. This division was to make Labour the opposition party for the first time, in what was a Conservative victory. A year later the Prime Minister, Bonar Law, resigned and was succeeded by Stanley Baldwin. Baldwin was typical of the new Conservatism. The son of a midland ironmaster, he rose through his gifts of oratory rather than those of intellect. He had been an indifferent Chancellor of the Exchequer and was generally viewed as indolent. However, in a period of industrial strife he had perhaps the most essential attributes: the ability and will to heal and ease tensions, and a firm belief in the middle ground. These he framed in a highly romanticised view of England, casting it, in clear contradiction to the reality, as a nation rooted in the rural landscape. Through his mastery of the new art of broadcasting this approachable man was able to weave his spell upon the public. His long-term political objectives were to obliterate the Liberals, above all Lloyd George, replacing them with Labour, aiming to establish a two-party system in which what the two sides had in common was greater than their differences.

As Baldwin wished to embark on a protectionist policy he felt bound to seek a mandate by holding another election on the issue of tariff reform. Although the Conservatives won the election they were outnumbered by the combined forces of Liberal and Labour, with the consequence that the king, George V, sent for the leader of the Labour Party to form a government. James Ramsay MacDonald was the illegitimate son of Scottish peasants but he was born with huge powers of oratory and with a will to rule. This first Labour government only held office for ten months, but it was long enough to establish in the eyes of the electorate that far from carrying through revolutionary measures Labour acted with responsibility, and could govern within the established scheme of things. The Liberals and Lloyd George were finished. Labour's major problem was how to distance itself from any taint of Bolshevist extremism. What brought them down was an attempt to make a treaty with Russia and the publication of a letter from the Comintern to the British Communists

asking them to overthrow the Labour government. Baldwin and the Conservatives were returned with a huge majority, but Labour also increased its vote.

Baldwin was Prime Minister again with Winston Churchill, who had deserted the Liberals, as Chancellor of the Exchequer. A return to the Gold Standard and to the old exchange rate for the pound of $4.86 contributed to spiralling unemployment. In the midst of the ensuing sharp downturn in the economy the miners threatened to strike. Baldwin bought time by granting a nine-month subsidy until a Royal Commission could present its findings. When it did, both the miners and their employers rejected them. The unions called for a General Strike on 4 May 1926. Although the government had prepared itself for a dramatic flare-up of class tension, Baldwin did everything he could to minimise its divisive potential, refusing to use force and always discriminating between what he regarded as two separate disputes. The General Strike he saw as a challenge to democracy, in which the will of four million union members was being forced onto a population of forty-two million. He came forward with proposals which broke the alliance and on 12 May the General Strike was called off. In this way a cycle of working class militancy which had gone on for a decade-and-a-half came to its end. The miners, however, continued to strike for a further nine months until they were forced to give in. The following year, the Trades Disputes Act declared general and sympathy strikes illegal. All of this was to overshadow what was the Conservatives biggest achievement, a reorganisation of local government in 1928-29 in which the old Poor Law was at last swept away and its responsibilities transferred, together with those for health and roads, to the counties and county boroughs. The Conservatives lost the 1929 election on the issue of unemployment. Nonetheless, a new two-party system was in place and something approaching consensus politics had emerged.



Conservative Party poster for the 1929 General Election, the year after the vote was extended to women. The sun radiates topics on which any government would henceforth have to deliver if they were to be elected.

A Labour government was returned, which quickly had to cope with realities and not ideals. During the three years it held office the world collapsed by half its cash value. The Labour government did precisely what a Conservative one would have done, put up taxes and reduced government expenditure, thereby adding yet fur-

ther to unemployment. By 1933, 23% of the workforce was unemployed, and the Cabinet set about finding ways to cut £78 million in the face of what was an international flight from sterling. On 23 August the Cabinet voted in favour of swingeing cuts, although Ramsay MacDonald felt that he was duty-bound to proffer the king his resignation. He returned from the palace having agreed to head a National Government. No one knows how this came about, he consulted none of his Cabinet colleagues and the party regarded his action as a betrayal. Reacting to cuts in pay to those in public service the fleet mutinied, and Britain came off the Gold Standard, the pound being devalued.

In response to such an appalling financial crisis the National Government called an election and was returned with a massive 556 seats. Ramsay MacDonald remained as Prime Minister with the Conservative Neville Chamberlain as Chancellor of the Exchequer, presiding over what was an economy gradually on the upturn. Protectionist tariffs were introduced, signalling the end of that bastion of Victorian prosperity and enterprise, free trade. In 1935 Ramsay MacDonald made way for the Conservative Baldwin, who was by now too old for office. His last act was to see through the abdication of Edward VIII. In this age of democracy, the monarchy had found a new role with George V, in which it combined private probity with public service and grandeur. The crown in 1936 passed to a man quite unsuited to maintaining such a dull role. Worse, he did little to conceal his pro-German sympathies and was in love with an American divorcée whom he intended to marry. Edward abdicated, and Baldwin resigned after the coronation of Edward VIII's brother as George VI, a name he took to reflect the return of monarchy to the dutiful role carved out for it by his father.

The genial Baldwin was succeeded by the distant and aloof figure of Neville Chamberlain. Cold and unsympathetic, Chamberlain had been a brilliant Minister of Health and Chancellor of the Exchequer, but it was his ill fortune to hold the premiership during a period when the whole focus was on the events which led up to war with Germany. When that finally came in August 1939 it brought the curtain finally down on what had been two tempestuous decades. No one, however, had solved the most fundamental problem: unemployment.

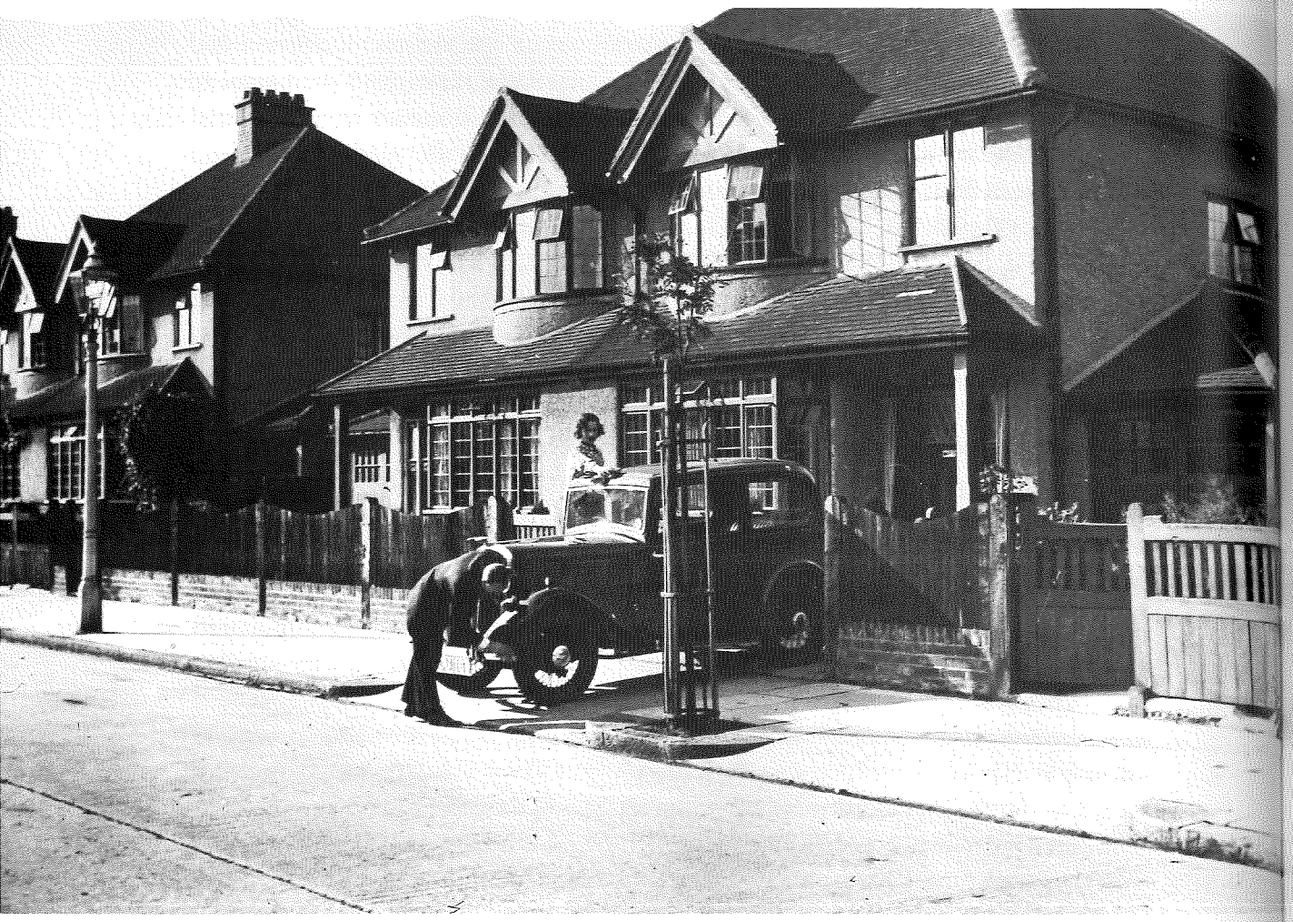
But beneath these intricacies of political life other more far-reaching changes were taking place. The years 1918-21 witnessed the greatest shift in land ownership since the dissolution of the monasteries four hundred years before. Land was no longer a basis for political power, nor, with agriculture in decline, was it profitable. Faced by 40% death duties (a tax introduced first in 1894) and ever-rising taxes the upper classes got rid of their estates, holding on to them only in urban areas. The

ever-increasing business and professional classes bought up land, reinforcing Baldwin's vision of the rural ideal as the British way of life. Aristocratic power had gone, but the external façade of aristocracy was maintained. Much to the horror of the old nobility, Lloyd George did a lively trade in giving honours to tycoons and industrialists, starting off with an asking price of £10,000 for a knighthood and thereon upwards.

In reality the enormous discrepancies in life-style so evident before 1914 were fast disappearing. Fewer and fewer people had servants, which removed the greatest social divide. Fashion in clothes and better diet meant that people could be far less easily placed in terms of class by their physical appearance than before. Although there was no diminution in differences of incomes, such differences were far less visibly perceptible. Everyone bought the same things, the rich merely buying a superior version. Even the advent of the BBC hastened this levelling, introducing to the public for the first time a universally accepted voice for speech. Levelling, of course, went up as well as down, as the progress towards an ever-larger middle class continued.

It was the middle classes who really held political power in the age of suburbia. House building boomed as never before, homes which for the first time had the new comforts of electricity and modern plumbing. In 1914 only 10% of the population were home-owners. By 1939 that number had risen to 31%. Families were smaller. The birthrate began to fall from the 1870s onwards, but in the post-war period control of the size of families through the use of contraceptives became customary for the middle classes. Life expectancy rose sharply: in 1921 it was fifty-six for men and sixty for women. This was due to medical progress and the conquest of centuries-old killer diseases, allied to improvements in diet. Much that had dimmed the lives of ordinary people in the past was now taken care of by the state. In 1925 the provision of pensions was extended to widows and orphans, and the age for the old age pension was dropped from seventy to sixty-five. Gradually the state was taking to itself roles until then regarded as the responsibility of the family, such as looking after the old, sick, orphaned and bereaved.

Better housing, longer life span, smaller family units, and for those in work more leisure and more money than ever before. Consumerism was to be one of the major themes of the century. Chain stores such as Woolworths and Marks & Spencer became the norm in every city high street. What was regarded as the average necessary equipment for the ordinary home multiplied to embrace the vacuum cleaner, the gas stove, the radio and even the refrigerator and gramophone. The motor car, which before 1914 had been the plaything only of the rich, became a middle class necessity. By 1939 there were half-a-million holders of driving licences.



Suburbia arrives, the epitome of the huge rise in living standards by the lower middle class between the wars: a semi-detached house with garden and garage and a car.

Not only did people accumulate more things, they also had more time at their disposal. After 1918 the work-ing week was reduced from fifty-six to forty-eight hours. By 1939, eleven million manual workers had at least a week's paid holiday a year. Mass entertainment arrived in the form of the cinema and the dance hall. Public libraries in 1939 lent two hundred and fifty million books; four years before that the paperback book was born. Sport was enjoyed by every level of sōciety: hunting by the upper classes, cricket and rugby football by the middle classes, greyhound racing and association football by the working classes.

The tide turned sharply against many of the attitudes which bound together

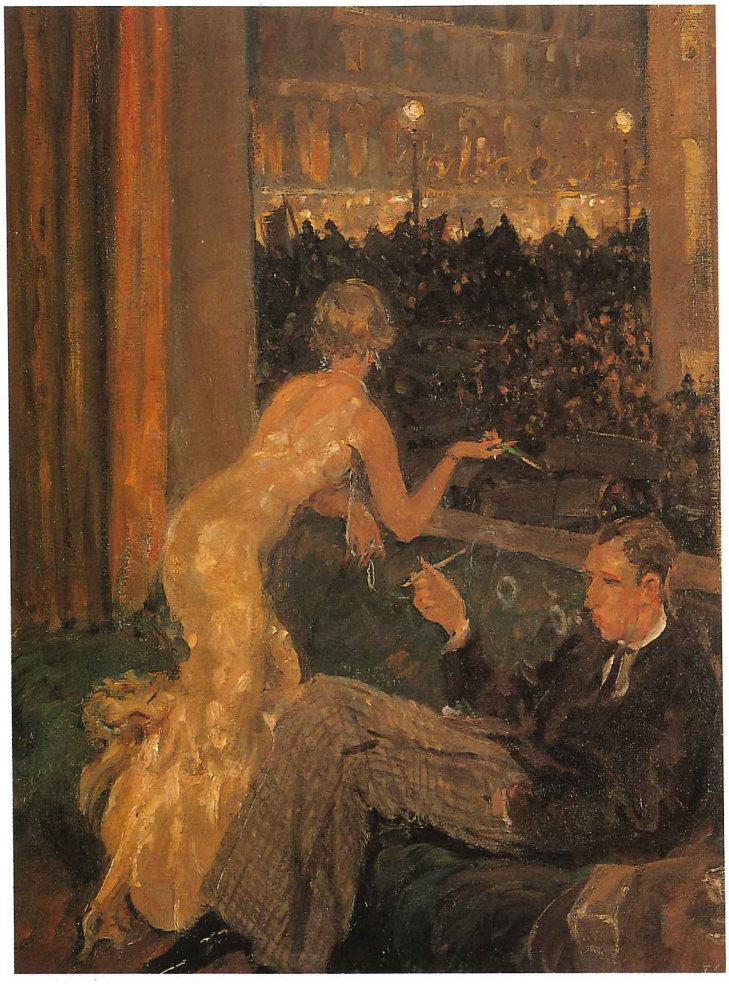
Victorian society. Sex ceased to be an unmentionable activity. Religious observance, which had never had a hold on the urban masses, continued to decline sharply. Nonetheless the state showed no willingness to relinquish its hold over the Church of England, vetoing in Parliament attempts in 1928 to revise the *Book of Common Prayer*, unchanged since 1662.

Sexual equality for women continued to make further strides but the ingrained attitudes of centuries were not easily shed. Acts in 1919 and 1923 gave women rights equal to those of men in cases of divorce. Women gained the vote fully in 1928, but the reality of their new status was slow to gain ground. Few made any headway in the professions and women's pay remained inferior to that of men.

The advent of the British Broadcasting Corporation, the BBC, in 1926 probably did more to create a new national sense of common identity then anything else. The first Director General, the future Lord Reith, was a dour Scot but he had all the abilities needed to understand this new invention and take it into the lives of everyone. He was a cultural dictator who believed in the rule of taste and rectitude, but that did not mean he lacked imagination. The potential of the new medium for education and entertainment was enormous. Music alone was suddenly accessible to all. Even more importantly broadcasting opened the doors of people's minds as never before.

In spite of unemployment and poverty leading to mass marches and demonstrations, there was no increase in crime. Events like the famous hunger march from Jarrow in 1936 were orderly, civilised, non-violent affairs. Throughout Western Europe liberal democracies had been threatened by the slump. In the case of Germany, democracy was swept away. But extremes never took hold in Britain. On the far left were the Communist Party and the Unemployed Worker's Union. On the far right there was, from 1932, the British Union of Fascists. The following for such movements was small, and they were treated humanely. The Public Order Act of 1936, however, prohibited the wearing of uniforms for political purposes (the British Fascists had donned black shirts), and put a limit to paramilitary forces. Chief Constables were also given the power to ban processions likely to lead to public disorder.

These were the two decades when government failed to face up to the bitter truth of the terminal decline of some of the country's major industries. Instead they fudged and fumbled, instituting welfare payments to salve the situation. The initial 1911 Insurance Act was hugely developed and extended. By 1931 unemployment was costing £125 million. In 1934 the Unemployment Act brought the administration of relief under government aegis by means of Public Assistance Committees. The



Thomas Campbell Dugdale captures the sometimes cruel social division of the 1930s. A decadent couple lean out of a window of the luxurious Ritz Hotel to watch the arrival of out-of-work miners from Jarrow in 1936.

introduction of a means test, however, was bitterly resented. Nonetheless, by 1939 Britain had one of the most advanced unemployment welfare systems in the world.

The Conservatives had held office for eighteen of those twenty-one years. They did so because the Liberals were split and also because Labour was viewed by the electorate with suspicion as to their true intent. But this was Conservatism of a very different kind from that at the opening of the century; in fact it was semi-socialist, certainly moderate and progressive, with men like Neville Chamberlain dedicated to improving the lot of everyone. That is not to deny that poverty existed, for it certainly did, but the definition of the poverty level had gone up considerably from what it had been in 1900. Society increasingly believed that the state had a role to play in running the economy. When war broke out again, government could at least work from the basis of a secure and unchallenged parliamentary democracy.