

Britain revisited

Lee Kuan Yew

Senior Minister of Singapore

A BBC World Service programme on how the monarchy and the British people have changed in the 50 years of Queen Elizabeth II's reign put me into a reflective mood. I thought of the Britain I knew as a student after the war, and the profound changes that have occurred in the last 55 years.

I first came to London in early October 1946. I arrived by ship at Liverpool and took a train to Euston Station. It was an inauspicious arrival. There was no one to meet me at Liverpool docks, because no one knew I was coming.

I had contrived a passage on a troopship, the Cunard liner *Britannic*, which was taking British troops home from Singapore for demobilisation. I had written to London and got myself admitted to the Middle Temple.

On the strength of that, I persuaded a kind-hearted officer in charge of military transport to make an exception and allow me to join the troops. Fortunately, there were a few Hongkong students on board. Arrangements had been made for them and when they were met by some officials from the welfare section of the Colonial Office, I hitched a ride.

From Euston, I was taken to a Victoria League hostel down in Earls Court. I remember a huge cavernous basement dormitory with double-decker bunks. There, I first met fellow colonial students, all British subjects like me, but from faraway places like Africa, the Caribbean and other colonies. Their strangeness added to my disorientation. I was determined to get away to more privacy as soon as I could.

Some three days later I persuaded a secretary in the YMCA at Great Russell Street, near the Tottenham Court Road tube station, to take pity on a young Chinaman who appeared lost and bewildered. He gave me a room for three days, the maximum limit, he explained, allowed to visitors to London.

Every three days, I turned up with my hard-luck story of the last three days and got my stay extended. At the end of the 12th day, I had found a room at Fitzjohn's Avenue, Swiss Cottage, then a quiet suburb.

I wrote to the law faculty of the London School of Economics (LSE), was interviewed by Prof Hughes Parry, the head of the faculty (later Vice-Chancellor of London University) and admitted as a student even though it was a few weeks after the academic year had started.

But I was ill-prepared for the hectic life in a university sited in a capital city like London. Lectures began at the LSE at Houghton Street; we would then have

to dash across the Strand to King's College for the second lecture; then a bus ride to Euston for the third lecture at University College; followed by a cafeteria lunch. Then back to the LSE by bus or tube either for tutorials or work in the library.

By the time I got back to my room at Fitzjohn's Avenue in the evening I was exhausted and depressed. For one from a small town where the bicycle took me wherever I needed to go, my life in London was one of total disorientation.

Furthermore I did not have the necessary survival skills. The book *Cooking In A Bed-sitter* was yet to be published. I can assure you that without these basic skills, life was inconvenient, uncomfortable and expensive. Eating in was drudgery, eating out a dreary experience. Food was on coupons. So were clothes. When my laundry came back, I calculated, to my dismay, that for six washings, I could buy a new shirt, provided I had the coupons. And a shirt got grimy at the collar and cuffs in half a day.

It was a different age and a different generation. After six exhausting years of bombings and privation, Londoners in the 1940s took great pride in themselves, were courteous and disciplined. Bomb sites were cleared, with the bricks neatly piled to one side and little make-shift gardens created.

Perhaps the most impressive sight I came upon was when I emerged from the tube station at Piccadilly Circus. I found a little table with a pile of newspapers and a box of coins and notes with nobody in attendance. You take your newspaper, toss in your coin or put in your 10-shilling note and take your change. I took a deep breath – this was a truly civilised people.

After three months of London, I abandoned life in a bed-sitter in Swiss Cottage, for the university town of Cambridge where survival skills were not necessary, because the university, which catered for 10,000 gentlemen, and a few young ladies, assumed they did not have such menial skills and so ministered to their needs.

That Britons are better off materially than they were is visible everywhere. But that quiet pride and self-confidence, that national cohesiveness that marked out the British people after victory in World War II, has dissipated. Many of my British contemporaries believed that the loss of empire caused that loss of élan. The mirage of Commonwealth unity beguiled the British people from facing up to the hard reality that Britain was no longer the heart of an empire.

Looking back at those early years, I am amazed at my youthful innocence. I watched Britain at the beginning of its experiment with the welfare state; the Atlee government started to build a society that attempted to look after its citizens from cradle to grave. I was so impressed after the introduction of the National Health Service when I went to collect my pair of new glasses from my opticians in Cambridge to be told that no payment was due. All I had to do was to sign a form. What a civilised society, I thought to myself. The same thing happened at the dentist and the doctor.

I did not understand what a cosseted life would do to the spirit of enterprise of a people, diminishing their desire to achieve and succeed. I believed that wealth came naturally from wheat growing in the fields, orchards bearing fruit every summer, and factories turning out all that was needed to maintain a comfortable life.

Only two decades later when I had to make an outdated entrepot economy feed a people did I realise we needed to create the wealth before we can share it.

And to create wealth, high motivation and incentives are crucial to drive a people to achieve, to take risks for profit or there will be nothing to share.

It is remarkable that powerful minds like Sir William Beveridge's, who thought out this egalitarian welfare system, did not foresee its unintended consequences. It took more than three decades of gradual decline in performance before Margaret Thatcher set out to reverse it, to restore individual incentives and the motivation to succeed, to encourage risk-taking, necessary for a successful entrepreneurial economy.

In the five decades since I first came to London, so much has changed. I remember enough of the past to regret the passing of that age when power and influence made London throb and hum and count for much more in the affairs of the world.

Five decades ago, London was a grimy, sooty, bomb-scarred city, with less food, fewer cars, and deprived of the conveniences of the consumer society. But the people, then homogeneous, white, and Christians, were admirable, self-confident and courteous.

From that well-mannered Britain to the yobs and football hooligans of the 1990s took only 40 years. I learned that civilised living does not come about naturally. There are other significant changes. Britain is now multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-religious. Churches are nearly empty on Sundays with many de-consecrated and converted into places of entertainment while some 500 mosques are filled to capacity on Fridays, the Muslim Sabbath. There are also many Hindu temples and places of worship of other religions.

What of the future? I could not foresee my own country's fate. In January 1968 when the British government announced its withdrawal from the east of Suez, including Singapore, I feared the curtains would come down on Singapore. I read, with unease, several scholarly articles in British weeklies comparing it to the withdrawal of the Roman Legions from Britain. It was a most ominous analogy. It conjured up visions of loss of civic order, and of anarchy and barbarity in its place.

Fortunately, the past has not been an accurate pointer to the future. Today there are more people to-ing and fro-ing between Singapore and Britain now than then. And there are more British merchants, industrialists, bankers and professionals than ever in Singapore making a great contribution to our economy. Technological breakthroughs have made historical analogies misleading.

Many confidently predicted that the end of the Cold War would bring stability, and growth, the peace dividend. Instead the world is beset with new dangers, not least of them from fanatical Muslim terrorists. All the power and might of the United States may not be able to completely suppress religiously-driven terrorists. And America is fearful of weapons of mass destruction in the hands of a Saddam Hussein. Technology has brought different races with divergent religions and cultures into constant interaction and with unexpected and unhappy outcomes.

However, breakthroughs in science and technology, especially in life sciences, promise mankind longer, healthier and more fulfilling lives. It is the young across the world who will be the major beneficiaries of these discoveries but they will have to manage the problems that come with rapid changes in the way they live, work and interact with each other in an ever smaller world or there will be more strife and conflicts.