To what extent did World War II act as a catalyst for Social Change in Britain?

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World War II gave rise to countless cultural, political, technological and economic revolutions. Tensions lingered through the next several decades as post-war societies struggled to redefine themselves in an ever-changing, ever-polarizing world: the United States was gripped by contradictions between prosperity and institutionalized racial discrimination; Germany created new identities – the West as anti-communist and the East as the wartime anti-fascist resistance; witch hunts for Pétain collaborators and the violent decolonization in Southeast Asia and North Africa nearly tore French society apart. Britain faced different circumstances in the post-war period as the nation experienced significant social reform. World War II did act as a catalyst for social change, but only so far in that created an environment for the post-war consensus governments to institute unprecedented reform. While the experience of war made social change possible, the role of catalyst is limited because many of the ideas for progress were rooted in pre-war political platforms and many post-war reforms show lack of progress in society revealing the limited change in social attitudes during the war.

State control of most aspects of life during the war significantly contributed to post-war governments’ ability to institute change. Most importantly, the practices of resource allocation and mitigating labor disputes made government intervention in the economy more acceptable to the British people.¹ The 1941 budget attempted to maintain economic stability during the war through Keynesian policies, thereby creating the practice of state economic management.² Formation of reconstruction policy in the war cabinet, especially adaptation of the Beveridge Report, outlined the modern state as an industrial, wealthy, fully-employed society which the Labour governments would create in the post-war period.³ The evacuations which led to a mixing of social classes and the implementation of rationing in an attempt to

² Pugh, State and Society, p. 260.
create an egalitarian environment during the war created the government as an instrument of social change. Consequently, the experience of would help strengthen the Labour platform for the general election of 1945; changing public attitudes during the war would further aid the implementation of social reform after the war.

Total war in Britain affected the lives of most citizens as the government orchestrated massive organization of national resources. Not only did the war lead to Keynesian practices in the economy, but the war also shifted public opinion to support Labour’s policies and permanently shifted the political center to the left. The welfare state became possible due to the experience of the war; the foundations of the NHS lay in the emergency hospital service established during the war and the strength of government-labor relations helped implementation of post-war reforms. Finally, the war ended the marriage bar for working women, which would permanently allow expanded women’s professional work. The increased interaction between society and government during the war, therefore, created the possibility for the government to institute social reform. However, the progress achieved after the war should not be attributed entirely to the experience of war.

Many of the policies drafted as plans for reconstruction after the war, including many of the white papers and economic reforms, were based on pre-war Labour policies. As we’ve seen, the experience of war was necessary for the creation of the welfare state, yet many of the reconstruction and reform policies generated by the government were manifestations of the pre-war Labour platform. The Fifth Reform Bill achieved universal suffrage in Britain, allowing the rise of Labour who represented the working class interests. Influenced by the economic management of corporatism and communism, planning, regeneration of industry

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and high unemployment were principles developed by Labour in reaction to the boom-and-bust economy of the inter-war period. Central to Labour’s pre-war platform was state control of investment, interest rates, and high employment to ensure economic stability; they advocated a National Investment Board to direct semi-private investment and state control of the Bank of England to control interest rates. The 1937 Immediate Programme called for nationalization of key industries to prevent fluctuations in labor and stability. The policies drafted in the war cabinet and the reforms instituted after the 1945 election would reflect this Labour platform of developing a social safety net for the working class.

Let Us Face The Future became the slogan of Labour during the 1945 campaign and with the mandate won in the election, Attlee’s government set out to achieve the social progress envisioned during the war. The Beveridge Report built on pre-war plans for reform and served as the framework in the post-war period. The Report looked to increase support for families, institute new social security measures, expand educational opportunities, provide new public housing and eliminate want among the working class. The emergency hospital service transformed into the NHS; the Education Act of 1944 was aimed at improving public education. Labour’s vision of a mixed economy was achieved through the Full Employment and Financial Policy which ensured economic stability during reconstruction through the National Board of Investment and reform of the treasury. Nationalization of steel, coal and natural gas were established during the war and maintained by the Attlee government. The government favored policies that benefited labor, not only because Beveridge argued that full

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11 Ibid., pp. 18-19.
14 Marwick, War and Social Change, p. 160; Pugh, State and Society, p. 305
16 Ibid., p. 18-21.
employment would reduce the burden on the welfare state, but also because of labor’s essential role in victory. Reduced working hours per week, support of collective bargaining and limited firing ability of management all developed a working class social security net. By supporting increased wages, the government helped increase affluence among the working class, which lead to a rise in the standard of living and blurred the traditional indicator of status. Americanization and ‘sex, drugs and rock’n’roll’ would dramatically change British society in the 1950s and 60s, but these changes resulted from the affluence created under Labour. Yet however much Attlee benefited from the war, the reforms of the Labour government merely created a façade of progress in the post-war period.

One of the overarching goals of the social reforms of Labour was to move Britain towards a classless society. However, British society was still gripped with inequality and many reforms only institutionalized these inequalities. The Beveridge Report fundamentally reinforced gender roles in several ways: financial allowances were granted to parents of two or more children; single mothers were eligible, but the child restriction reinforced women’s “duty” of childbearing. The Report viewed women’s domesticity as necessary to stability; married couples were treated as a single economic unit preventing women income opportunities and forcing reliance on their husbands. While there wasn’t mass expulsion of women from the workforce after the war as had been the case at the close of the Great War, the National Insurance Act of 1946 offered significant disadvantages to women in terms of pensions and unemployment benefits. During the war, women had been allowed to return to work out of necessity for labor, not due to progressive social thinking; during reconstruction

20 Wakeman, “European Mass Culture in the Media Age”, in Themes in Modern European History, pp. 143-146.
21 Pugh, State and Society, p. 260.
22 Bruley, Women in Britain, p. 129-130.
23 Bruley, Women in Britain, p.129-130.
the government encouraged women to return to the workforce, but offered no assistance in returning to work, thereby reinforcing ignorance towards women’s domestic lives by expecting women to shoulder professional and domestic burdens.\textsuperscript{24} The government failed to pass anti-discrimination measures during the war or to enforce equal-pay practices after the war.\textsuperscript{25} Unfortunately, further discrimination was shown in the educational reforms and towards commonwealth migrants.

The Education Bill of 1944 and the 1948 British Nationality Act institutionalized class divisions. While the former aimed at creating social mobility, it had the opposite effect. The plan divided pupils by ability into three sections of schools; at age 11, student tests determined the educational opportunities they received for the rest of their lives.\textsuperscript{26} Availability of top secondary schools was based on availability of resources and higher education was denied to the financially ineligible; therefore, enrollment was infinitely tied to region and socio-economic status.\textsuperscript{27} Young women were forced into limited educational horizons and taught to think of work as a transition between schooling and marriage.\textsuperscript{28} The Nationality Act initially allowed migrant workers to enter Britain, but was soon reformed to discriminate against non-white workers.\textsuperscript{29} Women minority workers were systematically forced into low-paying, unwanted jobs.\textsuperscript{30} The traditional idea that the war ended class division is subject to verification: Evacuees were largely from poverty-stricken communities and wealthy householders often shirked on evacuation duty.\textsuperscript{31} Propaganda from the Ministry of Information encouraged citizens to sustain their courage, cheerfulness and resolution to win the war; however this was increasingly met with resentment from workers and women.

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\item \textsuperscript{24} Pugh, State and Society, p. 257; Burley, \textit{Women in Britain}, p. 121.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Pugh, \textit{State and Society}, p. 305.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Pugh, \textit{State and Society}, p. 306.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Burley, \textit{Women in Britain}, p. 127.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Jean-Jacques Jordi, “The Collapse of World Dominion”, in \textit{Themes in Modern European History}, p. 46-48.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Bruley, \textit{Women in Britain}, p. 125.
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who felt they were bearing the burden of sacrifice in the war effort. \(^{32}\) Summerfield and Marwick came to offer several reflections on the post-war reform: while the traditional gender roles may not have been erased, the war served as a personal empowerment for women, many of whom would not be the same housewives after the war. \(^{33}\) Marwick noted that the upper class wanted to feel solidarity with the middle and lower classes, but brought opposition to social change and maintained a monopoly on political and economic power.\(^{34}\) While the Britain might have moved closer towards a more progressive society, the underlying tones of resisting social reform hadn’t been dissolved by the war and significantly undermined the progress envisioned by the Labour government.

There should be no interpretation of the social reform following the Second World War as a product solely of the war itself. The war was an important facilitator of social change, but the reforms following the war were the implementation of pre-war Labour platforms. Furthermore, the war was not followed by significant social progress as education and migrant worker policies enforced classism and social reforms for women reinforced traditional gender roles. The war, however, did affect life for the British people: the London government became a means of social progress; women experienced personal liberation, and the war was followed by a general increase in standard of living. But the legacy of this social reform still has to be evaluated today. In October 2013, a St. Andrews’ student newspaper reported the University had only admitted 35 students from the poorest 20% of Scottish Postal Codes.\(^{35}\) Much like the United States, like France, like Germany, Britain also has to ask of itself whether a half-century of progress following the Second World War has been achieved for all its citizens.

\(^{32}\) Pugh, State and Society, p. 256.
\(^{33}\) Penny Summerfield, “Women, War and Social Change”, in Total War and Social Change, pp. 96-114.
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