



# We're Not Alright, Jack

England keeps becoming more American. Bad idea.

**T**he Americanization of Britain proceeds apace, as I had occasion to observe on a recent visit. Sometimes it seems that only the worst features of our national life cross the Atlantic: modernity without the efficiency. Crime, illegitimacy, drugs, and the welfare state have all increased. Judges have decided that they can override parents' decisions about what is best for children, almost one-fourth of whom are now raised in single-parent families. The law of liability has been loosened up to facilitate tort claims. And even though the divorce rate has soared, Parliament is proposing to remove the idea of fault from divorce completely, thereby making it easier to get one.

Despite sixteen continuous years of conservative government, socialism is still alive and well. A new book by the journalist Simon Jenkins, *Accountable to None: The Tory Nationalization of Britain*, points out that public spending took 43 percent of Britain's national product in 1979, and 44.5 percent in 1994. "Centralization" would have been a more accurate description. Mrs. Thatcher centralized power because she was afraid the local councils would implement socialism on their own if she didn't. The programs that grew fastest, Jenkins writes, were "demand-led welfare spending such as health, social security and law and order. Only drastic cuts in spending on public investment and later in defense kept the overall total within bounds."

In England, as in the U.S., the hierarchical Christian denominations continue to show extraordinary weakness at the top.

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This is especially true of the Church of England. In a recent church election, the traditional or Anglo-Catholic wing of the General Synod (governing body) lost 60 percent of its support, and the liberals gained further ground. George Austin, archdeacon of York and one of the best known remaining traditionalists, lost his seat. He told the *Times* that he believes it is only a matter of time before practicing gay clergy are ordained, a gay marriage service is included in the authorized liturgy, God is officially "She," and traditional morality and doctrine are dispensed with in favor of New Age philosophies.

"The bishops will cave in," he predicted. "That is the way the Synod works." He noted the "insidious niceness" of debate. "On gays they will say these are such nice people. Anyone who objects will be pilloried as homophobic." The Rt. Rev. Edwin Barnes, one of the surviving traditionalist bishops, noted that the new Synod will try to bring in "the whole liberal agenda, dispensing with the authority of scripture and tradition. As they would see it, it is bringing the church up to date in line with the spirit of the age. The Synod is not remotely representative." Newly elected Synod member Canon Margaret Bradnum of Wakefield has, for example, criticized the Bible story of Sodom and Gomorrah, arguing that it is wrong to cite it against homosexuality.

As in the U.S., there is growing talk of a need for moral, not economic, solutions. But those in leadership positions capable of influencing the moral climate live in permanent dread of seeming insufficiently progressive on all moral questions. The bishops rail confidently against any suggestion of cuts in welfare, but are content to see

divorce law loosened up still further. The divorce rate in England is now the highest in Europe (one in two marriages ends in divorce), and there are actually fewer first-time marriages today than there were a hundred years ago, when the population was little more than half its present size.

Still, the politically correct Lord Chancellor has proposed to loosen up marriage law even further by eliminating the notion of fault and allowing automatic divorce after twelve months on the application of either partner. Before 1857, it required an Act of Parliament to obtain a divorce. Today, the Roman Catholic bishops of England are on record as saying that, er, yes, the church does oppose divorce, but divorce is also a "fact of life," and therefore the new bill deserves support. It would reduce "conflict and bitterness." The Lord Chancellor "personally" believes that marriage should be for life.

**M**ugging is on the upsurge, and while I was in Britain Charles Glass, the liberal American journalist who was kidnapped in Lebanon in 1987, was severely beaten up for no reason by three Jamaicans in London. Taki Theodoracopoulos, who received similar treatment three months earlier, described the event in his *Sunday Times* column, having had dinner with Glass at Aspinall's. "He looked simply awful," Taki wrote. "But he had not changed his tune. Charlie is left wing and thinks our society is an unjust one and that the state is responsible for the inhumanity shown by some of its citizens. . . . We argued all evening. Even Lord Worcester, a Tory wet, thought Charlie was too wet."

One of the most eerie ways in which Britain is starting to resemble America is the condition of its public housing. Some think that the council houses were long ago sold off to the tenants by Mrs. Thatcher. The

most desirable detached or semi-detached houses were indeed sold. By the late 1980s, 1.25 million houses, or one-fifth of the total council-housing stock, had been transferred to their occupants. But the blocks of ugly slab-concrete flats were not sold, meaning heightened economic disincentives for those living in them, rent subsidies were increased, and new public housing was built. According to Simon Jenkins, "Central government spending on housing rose rather than fell throughout the 1980s."

When I was in England, stories were appearing in the papers about the bad condition of a public housing project in Sheffield, the Manor estate with 8,000 residents. The archdeacon of Sheffield was quoted as saying that youths in the project appeared to have "no aim but the destruction of people's lives and property." In a church on the estate, St. Swithun's, every single window had been broken a few nights earlier. Other incidents included the burning down of a local community center and youth club, arson attacks on newly built houses, joy-riding in stolen cars. Interviewed by the *Daily Telegraph*, Mick, 23, and to "the Manor" born, said: "The kids smash windows. All we do is light the bonfires. You spend all day suppin' [drinking] 'cos there's nowt else to do. Then you gather at night for the buzz and you have a laugh and build a fire to keep warm. . . . It's not us causing trouble—it's the babbies, the kids." An ominous harbinger, perhaps.

At night, forty or fifty youths will leave their crumbling homes and gather round fires they have set using purloined building materials. "There is, they say, nothing else to do," the *Telegraph* reported. "They take drugs, drink beer and cider and have sex—local residents are forever finding discarded condoms." The Bishop of Sheffield has pleaded for additional government help and policing of this "desperate community."

As in the U.S., the bishops do not yet understand that responsibility is imposed upon most of us by the exigencies of financial obligation. When welfare undermines that responsibility, morality goes with it. Yet the bishops still howl like Pavlov's dogs at any suggestion that income transfers be trimmed, let alone eliminated. That is how far we still are from so much as diagnosing the leading social problem of

our time. There has been very little word in the U.S. press of these British developments. For one thing, the social decay cannot easily be blamed on racism. Mick and his Manorite mates are white.

**A**s it happens my sister Magdalen, last heard of in this space protesting cruise missiles at Greenham Common, lives in Sheffield, about 150 miles north of London. One day I drove up to see her. Sheffield, once famous for the manufacture of steel, still makes cutlery for the top end of the market, and an industrial museum in the authentic location shows the way it used to be. But technological change, foreign competition, and privatization have greatly reduced employment in this line of business. Great tracts of public housing blanket the eastern approaches to the city, and one sees sari-swathed Pakistanis ("blacks" to the natives) trudging across the dreary post-industrial landscape, carrying their heavily laden plastic grocery bags.

My sister is still on the left—"the left-wing of the Labour Party," she told me. She teaches something called occupational therapy at one of the new universities—formerly a polytechnic. There are now over a hundred universities in Britain, and I believe the newer ones are essentially training grounds for employment by the Department of Social Security—the British equivalent of our Health and Human Services. Britain's DSS must be the largest employer in the country, spending about \$150 billion—one-third of all government receipts. One-third of the entire British population now lives in a household claiming either income support, family credit, or housing benefit.

Magdalen and I drove around Manor estate. I think we both felt it was not quite as bad as press reports suggested. At night it is a "no-go area," and it is not a place you would want to leave your car unattended for too long at any time. One could see the familiar signs of decay—windows boarded up with plywood, graffiti, junked cars, a Netto supermarket with coiled razor-wire topping the picket fence in back. "Sign of the future, I'm afraid," Magdalen said, and I agree.

She believes the problem is unemployment, and, paradoxically, that the situation could be improved by a minimum wage law. (This Britain does not have, but the Labour Party has vowed to enact one when

elected.) In general, Magdalen shares the belief of the left that economic reality is something that can be repealed by legislation. A person of enormous goodwill herself, she finds it hard to believe that well-intended laws have unintended consequences. If they do, it must be because bad people still hold power and have prevented good things from happening.

**T**here is an economic problem in England—as all over Western Europe—but my diagnosis is quite different. Taxation is still way too high. The regulation of economic development is so strict that towns have barely spread beyond their 1955 confines. All countryside is sacrosanct. Admittedly, some restriction is necessary. Under American rules, London and Brighton would long ago have been joined by a 50-mile-long ribbon of development. But preservation has been way overdone. "Planning permission" is required to put one brick on top of another, anytime, anywhere. The economy is thought of as something that needs to grow—but by planned increments. With the permission and if necessary the assistance of the state, corporations will do the job.

My brother, who lives near Gatwick airport, would like to add a couple of rooms onto his house. The local conservation association has paid him a visit and made an inventory of every tree and shrub in his garden, to make sure that he doesn't commit any environmental crimes. Whether he will get permission to add a few more bricks to his house is highly problematic. For this reason, my impression is that when Mick and his mates on the Manor estate complain that there is "nowt to do," they are not entirely wrong.

Elections will be held within eighteen months, and it is likely that Labour will win. But market forces will permit only minor increments to socialism, and on the Nixon-to-China principle, Labour may be less afraid than Tory wets to make overdue changes. Meanwhile, the economic situation is worse in France, and beginning to unravel in Germany as well. America's economic lead over Western Europe will widen. "Europe," as a solidified supranational identity, will not come to pass. We are still living in the Age of Socialism. I would give it a few more years yet. ❧



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