

For the policy-makers, the planners, the intelligentsia, the readers of Penguin Specials, everyone with an occupational or emotional stake in 'the condition of the people', there was no shortage of problems to be tackled. Some flowed directly from the war – three-quarters of a million houses destroyed or severely damaged, huge disruption to public services, Britain's debt a record £3.5 billion – but others were of longer standing. Life expectancy had increased from some 50 years in the Edwardian era to about 65, and classic killer diseases like tuberculosis, scarlet fever and typhoid were almost under control, yet access to the medical services remained for many far from free or equitable, and considerable suffering resulted from an unwillingness or (more usually) financial inability to use them. Despite a reasonably energetic slum-clearance programme between the wars, there were still many appalling Victorian slums in the major cities and large pockets of overcrowded, inadequate-to-wretched housing almost everywhere. About seven million dwellings lacked a hot-water supply, some six million an inside W.C., almost five million a fixed bath. Above all, there was the profound emotional as well as practical legacy of the economic slump between the wars – at its worst from the late 1920s to the mid-1930s, causing widespread poverty and destroying or at best stunting millions of lives. The resonance of 'Jarrow', the 'murdered' north-east shipyard town that famously marched against unemployment, or indeed 'the thirties', would last for half a century. Even a Prince of Wales had once murmured that something had to be done; it had become a less than revolutionary sentiment to agree.

Wartime developments had – at least in retrospect – a seemingly irresistible momentum. As early as January 1941, while the bombs were falling, *Picture Post* outlined in a celebrated special issue (complete with six naked, presumably impoverished small children on the cover) 'A Plan For Britain'. The magazine recalled the sudden end of the war in November 1918: 'The plan was not there. We got no new Britain... This time we can be better prepared. But we can only be better prepared if we think now.' Accordingly, a series of articles (including 'Work for All', 'Plan the Home', 'Social Security', 'A Plan for Education', 'Health for All' and 'The New Britain Must be Planned') offered an initial blueprint for 'a fairer, pleasanter, happier, more beautiful Britain than our own'.

Over the next 18 months or so, the concept began to be accepted that the British people, in return for all their sufferings in a noble cause, deserved a new start after the war. December 1942 saw the publication of the Beveridge Report, drawn up by the eminent economist and civil servant Sir William Beveridge. In it he set out proposals for a comprehensive post-war system of social security, in effect laying the foundations for the 'classic' welfare state – an attack upon what he memorably depicted as 'the five giant evils' of want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness – and in so doing caused such a stir that an extraordinary 630,000 copies of the report (mainly the abridged, popular edition) were sold. Then, in 1944, as the war began to draw to a close, there were two major 'reconstruction' moments: in May the publication of a White Paper that committed the British government to the pursuit of full employment as the highest economic objective; and in August the arrival on the statute book of R. A. ('Rab') Butler's Education Act, which, among other things, created free, non-fee-paying grammar schools.

To all appearances the reforming, forward-looking tide was running fast. *Who Else Is Rank* was the symptomatic title of an unpublished novel co-written the following winter by a 22-year-old Kingsley Amis and a fellow Signals officer. 'We must see to it after we're demobilised,' the Amis figure (a sensitive young lieutenant) says at one point, 'that these common men, from whom we're separated only by a traditional barrier – we're no more than common men ourselves – benefit from the work that has been done, and if the system won't let that happen, well, we shall just have to change the system.'

In April 1945, as Hitler made his last stand in Berlin, the Labour Party issued its manifesto for the election that was bound to follow the end of the war. Called *Let Us Face the Future*, it demanded decisive action by the state to ensure full employment, the nationalisation of several key industries, an urgent housing programme, the creation of a new national health service and (in a nod to Beveridge) 'social provision against rainy days'. The tone was admirably lacking in bombast but distinctly high-minded. 'The problems and pressures of the post-war world,' the fairly brief document declared, 'threaten our security and progress as surely as – though less dramatically than – the Germans threatened them in 1940. We need the spirit of Dunkirk and of the