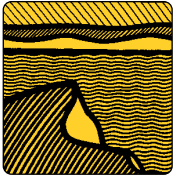**europe inside out**

Olivier Sykes offers a counterfactual tale of Christmases Past and Present and asks if there is still scope for an activity like planning to make the world 'otherwise'

# of humbug, christmas spirits, 'guilty governments', and worlds made 'otherwise'…

'The air was filled with phantoms, wandering hither and thither in restless haste, and moaning as they went. Every one of them wore chains like Marley's Ghost; some few (they might be guilty governments) were linked together; none were free.'
Charles Dickens, 1843

It has become common almost to the point of cliché at this time of year to 're-purpose' the format and characters of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* to frame reflections on contemporary events. But in a season not exactly devoid of cliché, and which perhaps derives not a small amount of its charm and comforting atmosphere from precisely this fact, to do so again is perhaps in the spirit of what the festive season has become since its own earlier 're-purposing' by Victorian society.[1] The following lines are offered in the 'what if?' 'spirit' of counterfactual history telling.

2019 – a tale of Christmases Past and Present which may have been

An election before Christmas was far from everybody's idea of good timing and had occasioned many groans and exclamations of 'What another vote? 'Bah humbug'!' when announced. What with work deadlines to meet, parties to attend, Christmas cards to write, and children's Christmas shows and associated costume-making to fit in etc., for 'normal' people this new political intrusion was about as welcome as a puncture on a bleak midwinter snow-filled lane between Skipton and Pateley Bridge (a picturesque seasonal image, even if there was unlikely to be much snow even 'up there' these days).

Perhaps reflecting this, in England turnout was down on the 2017 general election from 69.1% to 67.4%. But something was stirring north of the border as Scotland saw a rise in turnout, with 68.1% of the electorate voting compared with 66.5% in 2017.

In any case it was all over now – and what a relief! The level of debate had been unedifying, with repeated failures to ensure effective press regulation over the years resulting in the usual partisan position-taking and broadcasters seemingly happy to introduce bias into their reporting to ensure a veneer of 'balance'. A process of the UK exiting the European Union (which had come to be known as 'Brexit') had been launched after a referendum held on the matter in 2016, which had dragged on past the point at which the UK was supposed to have left. In fact, few could remember how many times this was meant to have happened already, or had a clear idea of how long the next phase of agreeing the minutiae of the UK's future relationship with the rest of the EU would take. People were weary of it all.

Still, the Conservatives had sought to make getting the issue 'done' the central plank of their electoral strategy while other parties had spread their bets rather more widely, also focusing on issues such as the crises in the National Health Service, housing, social care, and the climate. The latter strategy seemed to have paid off, with the Conservatives' attempt to use a single issue and simple 'crude factually reductionist' slogans to replicate the 'Leave' campaign's narrow victory in 2016, having failed to deliver their hoped-for knockout electoral blow.

The party only managed to secure 43.6% of the popular vote with its 'Brexit first' based strategy, while a clear majority of voters had voted for parties in favour of remaining in the EU, or giving the people the option of having a second referendum on the terms of withdrawal. Adding Conservative votes to those of smaller parties, the pro-'Brexit' parties had garnered 46.4% of the popular vote, as opposed to the straight 'remain' or 'second referendum' parties' total of 52.7%. The issue was clearly still dividing opinion quite equally, even if the margin in favour of remain and/or referendum was greater than it had been in favour of 'leave' in 2016.

John Leech's classic 'Last of the spirits' illustration of 'Christmas Yet to Come' for Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* – 'Are these the shadows of the things that Will be, or are they shadows of things that May be only?'

However, analysts pointed out that, despite this state of affairs, thanks to the reform of the electoral system in the mid-2000s which had abolished 'first past the post' (FPTP), the representation in the House of Commons did broadly reflect the views of the electorate on the matter. Instead of the traditional outcome under FPTP, where a minority could typically dominate the majority, the prospect of a coalition of the Labour Party, Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party, Greens and perhaps Plaid Cymru was a viable option.[2]

Few doubted now that the electoral reform had been a crowning achievement of New Labour's modernising agenda for getting government to be more 'in touch with the people' in the then contemporary jargon. Yet at that time, at the apogee of the Blair years, there had been some in the Labour Party who had been resistant to the process

of reform, with one Labour old-timer colourfully remarking 'Why do we need PR when we are kicking the Tories' arses down the road anyway?' But the 'fuel protests' in autumn 2000, which led to some opinion polls showing that the Conservative Party had overtaken or reached equal standing with the Labour Party, had focused minds. One observer noted shortly afterwards around a Christmas Past in 2000, that 'This seems to be a new kind of protest co-ordinated with new technologies like mobile phones and e-mails with strong populist overtones and supported by a biased media. So we shouldn't be too complacent, as this kind of thing could be a growing phenomenon over the coming decades.'

In hindsight, although FPTP had served it well at different times in history, Labour had not regretted the decision to push for reform, which had enabled it to lead the 2010-2015 Labour-Liberal Democrat

coalition after the party had lost its overall majority after 13 years in power. The coalition had had to struggle with the aftermath of the financial and economic crises of the late 2000s and made some unpopular decisions, such as raising student fees (although the Lib Dems bore the brunt of anger for this, having committed not to do so in their 2010 manifesto). Labour's strongly unionist stance in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum had also seemingly entrenched its long decline north of the border.

Despite this, the coalition had not been widely unpopular, and Labour and Liberal Democrat Ministers had generally worked well together, bringing in strengthened (although still insufficient, some said) 'localist' autonomy and devolution to England and seeking to mitigate the effects of reductions in local authority budgets through targeted support, including EU Structural Funding, to areas facing particular challenges.

But by 2015 – 18 years since Tony Blair had walked into 10 Downing Street – the big pendulum of politics was ready to swing again and a Conservative administration came to power, promising among other things to 'balance the books', cut immigration, and offer an 'in/out' referendum on EU membership. The latter had duly taken place and been lost by the Prime Minister Theresa May, who had advocated remaining in the EU, after a bitter campaign marred by breaches of electoral law and foreign interference.

May had immediately had stood aside in favour of Jeremy Hunt, a convert to the 'Brexit' idea, but by summer 2019, after earlier losing his majority in an election rashly called in June 2017, and following his failure to get the withdrawal agreement he had agreed with the EU through Parliament, he made way for Boris Johnson, who gambled everything in a new general election following a rehashed withdrawal agreement concluded with the EU in autumn 2019. With an election strategy of keeping the message simple and avoiding any scrutiny of the actual detail of the withdrawal agreement, this delivered some 304,000 more votes for the Tories than Hunt had attracted in 2017. The Liberal Democrats meanwhile improved their tally by 1.3 million votes.

Analysts pointed out that under the old FPTP system Johnson would have secured a sizeable majority with which to force through his agreement – as 43.6% of the vote share would have converted into a remarkable 56.2% of the seats[3] (although at the democratic cost that 45.3% of voters in the UK would not have voted for their MP[4]). Clearly, under FPTP an election would have been by far Johnson's safest gamble, as, unlike in a referendum, a majority would not have been needed.

In the event, the shift in opinion against 'Brexit' shown in opinion polls was reflected when voters actually 'went to the polls', and this, coupled with the PR system, meant that by Christmas 2019, another coalition was on the cards. The negotiations were complex, for the potential partners' positions were varied on 'Brexit' and other issues. The Labour Party, the SNP, Plaid Cymru and the Greens supported a new referendum ('a people's vote') on any withdrawal agreement, and the Liberal Democrats favoured revocation of the notice to withdraw from the EU. But as no majority of voters had endorsed leaving the EU on the terms of Johnson's agreement, but rather a majority had rejected the idea of leaving the EU with no opportunity to vote on this, or any revised withdrawal agreement, all agreed that in the national interest they had to work together.

Labour wanted its partners' full support in the renegotiation of a new EU withdrawal agreement to be put to the voters as an alternative to remaining in the EU in a subsequent referendum. In return for key posts and the guarantee of the 'remain' option being on the referendum ballot the Liberal Democrats agreed to come on board.

The SNP agreed to join the coalition, happy that the commitment to a new referendum would allow Europhile Scotland another chance to vote on remaining in the EU (after all, the opportunity to do so had been a key selling point of the 'Better together' unionist campaign in the 2014 independence referendum), and that the new UK government would not frustrate an agreement under Section 30 of the Scotland Act 1998 to devolve the power to hold a subsequent independence referendum to the Scottish Parliament (under PR the SNP had won fewer seats than they would have done under the old FPTP system and so had a need to negotiate and seek consensus on this point).

Plaid Cymru wanted a higher profile for Welsh issues, but was realistic that the appetite for an 'Indyref' did not yet exist in Wales to the same degree. Finally, the Green Party had been encouraged by aspects of the Labour Party's Green New Deal proposals and agreed to join the coalition in return for commitments on this, and consequential posts for some its 17 MPs.[2] Once the coalition was in place the voters waited to see if the partners would be 'better than their word' and do 'it all' or even 'infinitely more' (apologies to Charles Dickens).

An area of strong consensus among the coalition partners was that local areas, citizens and governments should be involved in a national conversation, or 'Grand debate', on 'Things that may be' with representation from different kinds of areas

(urban, rural, 'remain', 'leave', prosperous, deprived, etc.). Local government argued it had a significant and legitimate role to play here, as, despite a difficult decade in financial terms, a concerted effort at encouraging voter registration and participation, and a move to all-out local elections, had seen turnouts increase to 62.13%.[5]

Bah humbug!?

The scenes outlined in this counterfactual or, virtual, history may seem fanciful or even 'humbug'. Yet the kinds of debates, compromises and trade-offs described as being made in the fictional Christmas Present of 2019 are in truth only the bread and butter of more representative and consensus-seeking political systems and cultures. In the same way that *A Christmas Carol* confronts the extent to which choices and actions in the past shape the present, and how both the past and present shape the future, the account of an imagined past above postulates that different choices, at different points, or critical junctures, may have set in train different path dependencies leading to an alternative present for the UK.

'Nobody can say for certain which 'Christmas Yet to Come' – how many a linked chain – the UK has forged with its path these past weeks and years, or if things can yet be made otherwise, and if so how'

But what of actual Christmases Present and Yet to Come? As Scrooge anxiously enquires of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come after being shown a bleak glimpse of a future Yuletide: 'Are these the shadows of the things that Will be, or are they shadows of things that May be only?' – the kinds of questions a futures-orientated activity like planning deals in. After all, as Nigel Taylor states, planning:

'is about intervening in the world to protect or change it in some way – to make it other than it would otherwise be without planning.'[6]

But how can it be done? Is there still scope for an activity like planning to make the world 'otherwise'? In his last national newspaper article, Peter Hall commented that:

'the current state of planning presents a special version of that dilemma that George Orwell

famously spelt out in his essay on Charles Dickens: how can you improve human nature until you have changed the system? And what is the use of changing the system before you have improved human nature? The fact is that we will need to do both in parallel.'[7]

These lines, their ambition, the allusion to human nature, are both inspiring and sobering at a time when nobody can say for certain which 'Christmas Yet to Come' – how many a linked chain – the UK has forged with its path these past weeks and years, or if things can yet be made otherwise, and if so how. But no doubt many in the land this Christmas will empathise with Scrooge's supplication to the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come: 'Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life.'

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Notes

1 A recent film about the writing of Dickens' novella is even called *The Man Who Invented Christmas* – see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Man_Who_Invented_Christmas_(film)

2 P Worral: 'What might have happened under Proportional Representation?'. *Channel 4 News*, 13 Dec. 2019. www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/factcheck-what-might-have-happened-under-proportional-representation

3 'UK election a first-past-the-post disaster of the highest order'. News Story. Fair Vote Canada, 15 Dec. 2019. www.fairvote.ca/2019/12/15/ukelection/

4 '2019 general election results'. Webpage. Electoral Reform Society. https://ge2019.electoral-reform.org.uk/

5 In truth this was the turnout in in the second round of the 2014 local elections in France

6 N Taylor: *Urban Planning Theory since 1945*. Sage Publications, 1998

7 P Hall: 'Sir Peter Hall: reflections on a lifetime of town planning'. *The Guardian*, 1 Oct. 2014. www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/oct/01/sir-peter-hall-reflections-on-a-lifetime-of-town-planning