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Harry's Last Stand

Written by Harry Leslie Smith

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HARRY'S LAST STAND

**HOW THE WORLD MY GENERATION
BUILT IS FALLING DOWN, AND WHAT
WE CAN DO TO SAVE IT**

HARRY LESLIE SMITH



ICON

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Prologue

I remember how peace smelled on that day in May 1945. Of lilac, petrol and the rotting flesh of the dead German civilians entombed beneath the fire-bombed city of Hamburg. I was 22 years old. After four years of fighting with the RAF, I had survived and been given the chance to grow old and die in my bed. It was a day to weep for those that had been lost but also to dance and celebrate life, to drink to our good fortune.

There has not been a day in the last 60 years when I have not thought of how lucky I was. However, as I have grown older, I am no longer certain that the sacrifice my generation paid with their blood was worth the cost. Back then the people of Britain stood strong, unwilling to surrender to the tyranny of fascism, despite unimaginable civilian casualties and privations caused by the bombing that laid waste to our cities and industries. Our armed

forces, comprised of boys from every compass point on our island, knew that their lives might be wagered and their futures extinguished so that our nation, our way of life, might endure. Young lads became men in the desperate clash between civilisation and barbarism.

After six years of total war, millions of casualties, millions of dead, millions of maimed lives, Britain and her allies were victorious against the scourge of Nazism. But that is not the end of the story. My generation's resolve to create a more equal Britain – a more liberal world for our children to grow up in, where merit mattered and the class system was history – was set on the battlefields of Europe.

In November, when our nation remembers her fallen soldiers and honours the lost youth of my generation, the Prime Minister, government leaders and the hollow men of business affix paper poppies to their lapels and afford the dead of war two minutes' silence. Afterwards, they speak golden platitudes about the struggle and the heroism of that time. Yet the words they speak are meaningless because they have surrendered the values my generation built after the horrors of the Second World War.

We fought in tank battles in the Sahara. We defended the skies over Britain in dogfights with the Luftwaffe. Our navy engaged in a life-or-death conflict in the battle of the north Atlantic to preserve our dominion over the seas. We were compelled to invade the armed fortress of Europe on the beaches of Normandy. In desperate battle we fought the Germans from village to town through

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spring and summer in our bid to liberate France. As autumn turned to winter our armies, along with those of our allies, formed a united front that pushed through the lowlands of Belgium and Holland. Those final months of conflict were intense, brutal and bloody but we buggered on until we were in the heart of Germany and on the road to Berlin and victory.

When we accepted rationing and the lack of decent housing during the post-war period of reconstruction, it was because after the bloodshed we were all focussed on building something better for everyone. And for a while it seemed that the enthusiasm that blossomed in Britain, America, France and Canada for the creation of thriving societies for the poor, the working classes, the middle classes and the wealthy would endure. It seemed genuinely possible to create nations that combined social justice with economic mobility for every citizen.

But it didn't last. By the 1970s the British economy, as well as its society, was under serious threat from inflation, weak Labour governments that weren't able to stabilise the nation's finances or control the chaos and misery that average citizens endured from an endless array of industrial strikes. In that tumultuous decade it felt like the United Kingdom had lost the plot and overreached itself in its desire to build a just society through financial stability and fair play to both worker and employer. Picket lines formed like flash mobs out of nowhere and for no apparent reason. At any given moment lorry drivers,

coal miners, grave diggers or refuse collectors were on the streets demanding wage settlements that were meant to offset the horrendous cost-of-living crisis caused by inflation. However, for those who were not protected by a union it smacked of an 'I'm all right, Jack' attitude.

The 1970s were a tumultuous decade for the world's economies, but the rot really started to seep into Western democratic nations in the 80s, after the oil crisis and years of hyperinflation and chronic labour unrest. To my mind, the edifice of our civilised states started to crumble the day Ronald Reagan talked about the shining city on the hill that could be built without taxes, and when Margaret Thatcher said that come what may she would not be turned, no matter how many tears were spilled in her destruction of those who protected workers' rights. Those that had never experienced it began to talk about a golden age when taxes were low and opportunities were always available for hard workers, while the lazy perished in their own sloth.

In two short generations the tides of corporatism without conscience began to roll in and washed away the blood, sweat and tears of a hundred years of industrial workers' rights. Now, a nation that once had the courage to refigure society, to create the NHS and the modern welfare state, elects governments that are in lock-step with big business whose overriding pursuit is profit for the few at the expense of the many. We have gone from a nation that defied Hitler while the rest of Europe lay

subjugated under his boot to a country that is timorous around tycoons and their untaxed offshore wealth.

These technocrats and human resource experts have reversed my generation's struggle to close the gap between the richest and the poorest. They have betrayed our dream of an equitable society with medical care, housing and education for all. They have allowed it to be taken to pieces and sold off to the lowest bidder, and broken their pledge to protect democracy and the freedoms due to every citizen in this country. This cannot be allowed to happen in respectful silence. Too many good people died. Too many sacrificed their lives for ideals that have been too quickly forgotten.

Austerity, along with the politics of fear, is being used in this country like an economic Marshall Law. It has kept ordinary citizens in line because they are fearful of losing their jobs, being unable to make their rent, their credit card or mortgage payments.

In recent times, our governments and the right-wing media have toyed with our nervousness over the economy, over the state of the world and over our personal lives like they are poking a fire. They have sold fear to the people like the markets sell fish on Friday. We are mesmerised by this fear, stoked in a cauldron of sensationalist tabloid headlines about immigration, welfare cheats, sex scandals and militant terrorism out to extirpate Western civilisation. This perpetual war on crime, drugs, terror, immigration and benefits cheats has turned

us into a society that distrusts the unknown, the weak, and the poor, rather than embracing our diversity. We have become hyper-vigilant about imaginary risks to our person and our society, but indifferent to the threats that austerity creates to our neighbourhoods, our schools, our hospitals and our friends.

Sadly, the politics of fear work. People have grown indifferent to the concerns of those who are less well off than them. It is only natural because, after all, it's a hard scrabble life for the vast majority of people in Britain these days. We have become so consumed by our personal shifting economic fortunes that we can hardly be expected to think about anyone else's. We worry, we fret; we fear for our own health and our children's safety and future. We are now always in a panic about our jobs, about our inevitable redundancy at work. We are stressed by the health of our parents and whether they can make do on their pension pot. We worry if we can save enough to be free of work for a few years before death takes us. Ultimately, we are afraid that we will be like the people from my world in the 1930s. We don't want to be like our ancestors: never able to rest, always working until we are no good for anyone and then left to die alone in some darkened corner of this island.

The middle classes are so afraid that they will become as dispossessed as the poor that they have allowed the government to use austerity as a weapon against them and their comfortable way of life. But hospital closures,

bad roads and stagnant wages, along with stern cutbacks to the social welfare system affect us all – not just the indigent. I have been through this all before, and I don't want future generations to suffer as we did.

My generation never forgot the cruelty of the Great Depression or the savagery of the Second World War. We promised ourselves and our children that no one in this country would ever again succumb to hunger. We pledged that no child would be left behind because of poverty. We affirmed that education, decent housing and proper wages were a right that all our citizens deserved, no matter their class.

Throughout the years, my generation was vigilant in keeping our word to the younger generation to ensure that they did not encounter want during their lives. As a society, we fought for equal pay for equal work; unions struck for better working conditions; many organisations endeavoured to end systemic and institutional racism, while others fought against the poll tax. However, my generation grew weak through age and our resolve declined. We gradually stopped our defence against those who sought to puncture the umbrella of the social welfare state.

I suppose we had hoped that our children would keep the torch of civilisation burning while we moved into our senior years. But something happened and their resolve wasn't as strong as ours. Perhaps they got caught up in the heady world of consumerism and thought that happiness

could be bought at a shop or found on an all-inclusive trip to the Bahamas, or perhaps they simply felt impotent in the face of such hardship. Whatever the reasons, from the 1980s onwards, the right-wing and New Labour governments nudged us to believe that the state was too big and needed the Midas touch of business to get it running right. Council estates were sold off, railways privatised, water put into the hand of big business. Slowly and surely, Britain and the West became societies that repudiated co-operation and socialism for corporate endeavours.

Now we live in an era when it is difficult to protect the advances made to society through our welfare state. The social safety net has been sheared by privatisation and policy makers who oppose the justice it delivers to all citizens. There are too many corporations who rely on zero-hour contracts to make enormous profits that are invested in offshore tax havens. We are losing the battle against poverty because governments and businesses won't address the disparity of wealth between those at the top of society and those who exist in the heap. Unless hunger, prejudice and rampant poverty are curtailed this nation will lose a generation, like it did mine.

When I talk to you about my past, I do so not through some golden-tinged nostalgia, or, like Monty Python's famous Yorkshiremen, in some spirit of competitive suffering, but because until you know what led to the creation of these aspects of our society, which are now so lightly discarded, you cannot understand why they were necessary.

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Until you have lived through a world without a social safety net, you cannot understand what the world our leaders will leave as their legacy will be like. You cannot feel it in your marrow.

I am not a politician or an economist. I don't have a degree in PPE from Oxbridge – and I'm sure those who do will be able to pick holes in what I say. But I have lived through nearly a hundred years of history. I have felt the sting of poverty, as well as the sweetness of security and success, and I don't want to see everything we've worked for fall apart. As one of the last remaining survivors of the Great Depression and the Second World War, I will not go gently into that good night. I want to tell you what the world looks like through my eyes, so that you can help to change it.