

AQA English Literature GCSE

An Inspector Calls Context

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Contextual Introduction

First performance

J.B. Priestley wrote 'An Inspector Calls' in a single week, so it was impossible to find a theatre to host it at such short notice. Therefore, surprisingly, the play was first performed in Moscow and Leningrad, Russia, in 1945. It reached London in 1946, when it was performed at the New Theatre. It was then performed on Broadway in 1947. Since then, it has been performed and reproduced countless times. It has also been adapted for film, TV, and radio, such as the 2015 BBC adaptation starring David Thewlis.

After its first London performances, the play was hugely successful. Many view it as Priestley's best work, and it has remained in the public eye ever since because of its popularity both with theatre troupes and with exam boards.

Popularity

Its initial popularity and good reception is partly because the play's style, genre, and topic was in keeping with a lot of theatre at the time. For example, the play can be seen



as **an example of a 'drawing room play'**. 'Drawing room plays' were **developed during the Victorian period, and their popularity continued into the mid twentieth century**. They focused on **events and actions that occurred in a drawing room**. Drawing rooms were used to entertain guests, particularly amongst the upper classes. 'An Inspector Calls' also fits the trend of **detective thriller** and **serious drama**, such as those by T.S. Eliot and George Bernard Shaw, in theatres.

However, the play fell out of fashion after the 1960s. Theatre had moved on with a new movement of Social Realist Theatre, which explored serious social issues within a contemporary (of the times) setting. 'An Inspector Calls', in contrast, was outdated, and many felt it was written for the rich and middle classes. Several revivals at the end of the century, though, brought the play back to life and back into popularity. **Today, it is celebrated for Priestley's criticism of Capitalism and middle-class hypocrisy**. Critics view it as an accurate reproduction of pre-World War I society as it fell apart.

J.B. Priestley

John Boynton Priestley, known as Jack, was born in 1894 in Bradford, Yorkshire. His mother died soon after, leading his father to remarry four years later. His father was a headmaster and Priestley had a grammar school education. He left school at the age of 16 instead of going to university. He got practical work experience, becoming a **junior clerk** at a wool firm in the city, while writing at night. Eventually, he got articles published in local and London newspapers.

Yorkshire's culture influences a lot of his work. In Bradford, Priestley witnessed a lot of **poverty amongst the working classes**. The city was **industrial**, with its **economy reliant on the wool and dyeing industries**. The living conditions had improved since the 1840s, but many still lived in **slums and impoverished conditions**. At the same time, Priestley took note of how the city's respectable folk behaved: he took them to be smug and hypocritical.



Priestley was raised surrounded by **Socialist values**. His father was a proud Socialist with many Socialist friends, and Priestley grew up surrounded by this group of people. His peers were intellectual and politically active. **This cemented his own Socialist values while he was still relatively young.**

War broke out when Priestley was 19, nearly 20. He volunteered for the army, and served for five years as a private, lance-corporal, and later an officer. While serving, he saw active front-line service in France, was buried alive by a German shell attack and was a victim of a gas attack. He survived physically unscathed, however, **his experience at war haunted him forever**. Many of his friends died, possibly leading to a feeling of survivor's guilt for Priestley.

His experiences at war made him realise how social inequality had consequences beyond what he had seen at home. In his memoir, published in 1962, he wrote: *"The British command specialised in throwing men away for nothing. The tradition of an officer class, defying both imagination and common sense, killed most of my friends as surely as if those cavalry generals had come out of the chateaux with polo mallets and beaten their brains out. Call this class prejudice if you like, so long as you remember ... that I went into that war without any such prejudice, free of any class feeling. No doubt I came out of it with a chip on my shoulder; a big, heavy chip, probably some friend's thigh-bone".*

After the war, Priestley studied Modern History and Political Science at Cambridge University before choosing to focus on his writing. He **moved to London**, and became a famous essayist, novelist, and radio broadcaster. Also, he **became a prominent Socialist, using his platform to speak out about class inequality and poverty in Britain**. At a regimental reunion in Bradford, he discovered that his fellow veterans were too poor to afford clothes for the event, and was outraged that they had given everything for a society that didn't care about them.



When World War Two broke out, Priestley became a radio broadcaster for the BBC. His show, the 'Postscripts', came on after the news. The main purpose of his show was to give his own **personal reflections on the wartime conditions**, and to **boost national morale**. He called for **a fairer, better society to emerge after the war**, but he had to be careful about how critical he was of the government. Before his show ended, he had used his broadcast to bring his listeners' attention to **the issue of inequality in wartime Britain**.

One of his most outspoken speeches went as follows: *"We are floundering between two stools. One of them is our old acquaintance labelled 'Every man for himself, and the devil take the hindmost', which can't really represent us, or why should young men, for whom you and I have done little or nothing, tear up and down the sky in their Spitfires to protect us, or why should our whole community pledge itself to fight until Europe is freed? The other stool ... has some lettering round it that hints that free men could combine, without losing what's essential to their free development, to see that each gives according to his ability, and receives according to his need."*

In 1942, Priestley became a **co-founder of the Common Wealth Party**, a Socialist political party. Priestley was, at this point, an **influential figure in British politics**. His opinions and broadcasts shaped a lot of the political debate of the period. He helped Labour win the election in 1945 and contributed to the formation of the Welfare State.

A key theme in Priestley's work was **responsibility**. He looked at how the individual and the collective had responsibilities and duties. He was also fascinated by **theories of time**, and developed his own theory on how time worked. Many of his plays looked at the **effects of an individual's actions over a passage of time** - just like what we see in 'An Inspector Calls'.

The Victorian Influence

Although it wasn't written or set in the Victorian Era, we can still see the influence of the Victorian culture in Priestley's portrayal of 1910's society. In fact, **many believe the play demonstrates the destructive impact of Victorian values**, and advocates for their removal from our modern culture.

Charity

One piece of Victorian culture we see clearly in the play is their **view of charity**, or philanthropy. Before Queen Victoria's reign, England had something called the 'Poor Law'. This law was set up by Queen Elizabeth I to provide help for the poor by offering them money and support. This was reformed by Victoria, who believed the poor should work to earn their help. This is why workhouses were set up. People facing poverty had to work in awful conditions in order for others to think them worthy of being helped.

The poor

Another aspect of Victorian charity was the idea of the 'deserving poor'. Even though poverty was out of the control of the individual and no one deserved to face starvation, the Victorians believed the poor had to be judged for their worth. If they were deemed to be moral, they could be helped. Along with this was the belief that those who offered charity were socially and morally superior.



Their choice to give help to others was seen as an impressive, Christian feat. Meanwhile, the poor were expected to practice self-help. This meant they had to make an effort to get themselves out of poverty, no matter how they ended up there in the first place.

Women

Women who society believed had **lost their innocence and fallen from the grace of God** were called “fallen women”. This included prostitutes, mistresses, and adulterers. Though these women were **condemned and ostracised by society**, there was a romantic ideal surrounding the way men treated these women. There was an effort by middle class philanthropists (those who offered charity) in the late nineteenth century to ‘rescue’ women from prostitution. This often included **religious and moral teachings**, as well as training so the women could enter the workforce. The Victorians also idealised the idea of **gentlemanly chivalry** towards these “fallen women”. Therefore, these women were **punished by society**, but the men who ‘helped’ them were celebrated. Priestley suggests this romantic ideal was actually based on **sexual exploitation and lust**. Men preyed on these “fallen women” as easy targets to satisfy their own needs while getting credit from their peers.

Hierarchy

The Victorians were obsessed with **strict rules and hierarchy**. A lot of Victorian morals were taken from the Bible, but their interpretation was often **harsher and more extreme** than the original Biblical texts. The Victorians were **very religious people**. They **believed in sexual restraint, honesty, politeness, cleanliness, and obedience of the law**. Everyone lived in a **hierarchy** determined by age, gender, wealth, and heritage. Your **role in this hierarchy determined which expectations you should fulfil**. For example, men would tip their hats to their social betters, and women would give up all property and legal rights when they married.

Repression

A side effect of all this **restraint and repression** was a great deal of hypocrisy. The brothels and opium dens of Victorian London thrived. Most of the people in the upper classes, particularly the men, lived a double life. They took part in all the ‘sinful’ activities that, by day, they would condemn. We see evidence of this **double life** in ‘An Inspector Calls’, such as with Eric and Gerald’s appearances in the bars of Brumley.

The Two World Wars

The First World War, otherwise known as the Great War, lasted from 1914 until 1918, while the Second World War lasted from 1939 until 1945. **Both wars would change the economic, political, and social landscape of Britain irreversibly.**

The Class System

One of the most relevant impacts of the World Wars when it comes to ‘An Inspector Calls’ is how they **dismantled the class system**. War was a unifying event in many ways for the country. Everyone, rich or poor, experienced the same black outs, bombing raids, rations, and fears. Wealth meant little when the country was at war, meaning the **upper classes experienced the same**



conditions as their poorer peers. Anyone could lose everything from a bombing raid.

Conscription (mandatory enlistment to the army) meant that every man, no matter his class, was forced to fight. Many rich families lost their fathers, brothers, and sons, along with the lower classes. Many rich families also lost their wealth, and many estates were also lost. **Not only was there less difference between the classes: there were fewer upper class people altogether.**

Attitudes towards war

Another interesting thing to consider is people's **attitudes towards war**, particularly during the First World War. When Britain first went to war in 1914, the decision was met with a lot of **optimism and enthusiasm**. Many men, even underage boys, volunteered to enlist. A common saying was 'Over By Christmas', as people believed the war would be over quickly. Men who did not enlist were often **publicly shamed** for it. Posters calling for recruits guilted men into volunteering, implying they would be cowards not to or saying that women would love them more for it. These attitudes were echoed in the literature written at the time. The whole movement is called **jingoism**.



However, the war was not 'Over By Christmas' and attitudes towards war began to change. People were shaken by the **large massacres** in battle, such as at The Somme. Men were forced to fight. Many died. The country was in dire straits. The First World War was the first major war to be mechanised - guns, bombs, grenades, and other ammunition made the war much more deadly. Gas attacks were a new horror. Poets writing from the battlefronts recorded the **gruesome**

reality of war. Many disagreed with the way innocent men were sent to their deaths by the authorities: the men at the very top of the social hierarchy who never went near danger. Many felt they were fighting another man's war.

The Second World War brought another sense of **unification and teamwork** to the country. Bombing raids meant the conflict felt much closer than it had during the First World War. The **evacuation of children** from the cities into the countryside meant **lower class and upper class families mixed**, bringing awareness to the extreme poverty that still existed in cities. Rationing brought everyone to the same level, and **created a sense of sharing and cooperation**. Similarly, during blackouts and bombing raids, families would come together and help each other if needed. **Everyone was at equal risk**. Overall, the war nurtured a great community spirit and mentality. This continued after the war, which is why new laws were passed.

The government

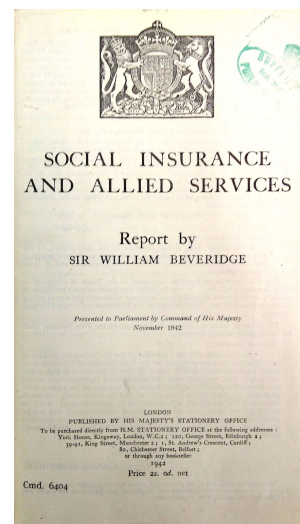
The government became much more involved in people's lives during World War Two. This undid the policy of a '*laissez-faire*' government. **Rationing and evacuation** were both examples of how the government **took measures to protect its people**. During the war, a social policy expert called William Beveridge was asked to **investigate social security**. This would help the



government **reform their social policies** and **recover from the impact of war**.

Beveridge's report identified five problems that stopped people from improving their lives: poverty, lack of education, poor housing, unemployment, and poor health care provision.

Beveridge also recommended several measures the government could take, including benefits for the unemployed, family allowances, pensions, grants, and the National Health Service.



The Great Depression

The period between the First and Second World Wars is also important when understanding the state of Britain's economy and politics in 1945. **The Great Depression** was the **worst economic event since industrialisation**. It began in 1929 with the Wall Street Crash and though it started in America, its impacts were felt worldwide.

The Wall Street Crash refers to when **America's stock markets crashed** in 1929. The country experienced an **economic boom** after the end of World War One, so everyone had money to spend. A lot of this money went into stocks, so the stock market expanded rapidly. However, these high stock prices didn't match the state of the rest of the country. Wages were low, unemployment was high, and production had declined. Many consumers were in **debt**. Eventually, people panicked and started selling their stocks at ridiculous prices, and the market crashed.



The crash caused a worldwide recession.

Consumer spending and investment decreased. Industrial output decreased. Unemployment rose. Banks failed. Money lost its value. Famously, in Germany, people carried their money in wheelbarrows.

Like the war, the Great Depression meant that people of all classes experienced the same dire circumstances. Everyone suffered. The upper classes in Britain learnt what it was like to work and not be paid fairly.



The Class System

1912

The class system in 1912 was very similar to the class system set up by the Victorians.

Britain was stuck in a rut when it came to social equality. Like in the late nineteenth century, the rich and poor lived side by side, but the actual lives they had were incredibly different.

The upper classes often had luxurious stately homes or estates in the country to escape the squalour and poverty of the cities, but for the lower classes it was rare to travel outside of your city or village. **Poverty was extreme in both the cities and the countryside.**



There was a huge distinction between the upper and lower classes in almost every way. People could identify your class from the way you looked and dressed. The upper classes had plenty of money to spare, whereas the lower classes could barely afford food. Lower class families often had **many children to increase the number of people who could work for a wage**, but this meant more mouths to feed, and often a whole family would sleep in one or two rooms. Hygiene and sanitation was available to the upper classes, but the lower classes lived in squalid, disease-riddled conditions. Many lower class people had **little to no education**, with children leaving school early - as early as 11 years old.

Women

Life was particularly difficult for lower class women. Unlike their upper class counterparts, who could rely on marrying and being supported by their husband's wealth, many lower class women needed to work to have any chance of supporting themselves. The work available to them was some of the **lowest-paid and lowest-skilled**, as many women had **no education**. Working class women needed to **marry and have children** to have any chance of being accepted by society, but being a mother made working even harder. Many women left the workforce after marrying, but some didn't have a choice.

Unmarried women were almost ostracised from society. They were **vulnerable** and often lived in **total poverty**. If an unmarried, working class woman became pregnant, like Eva did, she didn't have many options available to her. Many risked **backstreet abortions** rather than facing the stigma of having a child out of marriage. Many working class women were forced into **prostitution** - 'onto the streets' - if they became unemployed, because there was no other choice.

A lot of upper class men **exploited their serving girls and female staff** by having sex with them. Many of these women and girls became pregnant by them, but had to keep the relationship a



secret. If it was discovered that they were pregnant, they would lose their jobs. Their only hope was for the father of the child to marry them, but this rarely happened.

The servant class

Another factor to consider with the 1912 class system is how the **lower classes were expected to serve the upper classes**. It wasn't just that the two classes had to live separately: one class was better than the other, and had to be treated as such. The lower classes, particularly young girls from working class families, got jobs as maids or servants in wealthier households. The poor earned their money by working for the rich. Often, their wages were small.

After the **industrial revolution**, many working class people worked in factories or warehouses, just like Mr Birling's in the play. These factories and warehouses were owned and controlled by wealthy families - the poor were still working for the rich. Therefore, the **upper classes controlled the wages and employment of the poor**.

Stereotypes of the lower classes

Many factors contributed to the **stereotype** of lower class people being dirty and sinful. This **fear of the poor** began in the Victorian era but continued into the twentieth century. The upper classes were convinced that the lower classes were all thieves, criminals, and sinners, who would pollute them and **threaten the purity of the nation**.



On top of this, many rich people were convinced that the poor only had themselves to blame for their troubles. They believed the **lower classes were stupid or idle**, or didn't work hard enough, and this was why they fell into poverty. If the poor deserved it, then it wasn't the upper classes' job to fix it.

Social mobility

Social mobility is the ability for an individual, family, or group to **move between different social classes**.

Social mobility in 1912 was **nearly non-existent**. The lower classes couldn't get jobs that paid well because they weren't educated or 'skilled' enough. Furthermore, many employers wouldn't hire working class people for the 'grander' or better jobs. Working in industry was thought by the upper classes to be suited to the lower classes because it matched their 'dirtiness', and was a good way to keep them out of view.

Another issue was that social class was determined by a lot more than just your wage or job.

Family heritage - coming from a line of wealthy, successful people - carried a lot of weight. People



cared about your roots, your origins were hard to shake off. If you didn't have the contacts or knowledge to reach the higher classes, you had no choice but to continue in the class you were already in. The worst part was that the upper classes saw no need for change, and because they were the ones in charge they got their way.

We can see the **interactions between classes** through various relationships in *An Inspector Calls* - the marriage of Mr and Mrs Birling, the engagement of Sheila and Gerald and the relationships between Eva and Gerald and Eva and Eric.

1945

As we already established, **the two World Wars did a lot of work against the class system**. The upper and lower classes were a lot closer by 1945. For once, they had experienced the same dreadful things. Rationing of clothes and food meant people ate the same things and looked the same. The Depression followed by war had almost bankrupted the country, so everyone was in the same boat when it came to wealth.



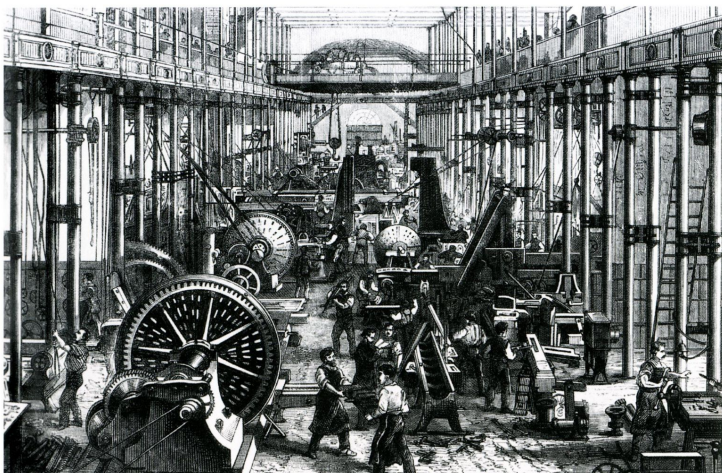
Also, in 1928 the bill (1928 Equal Franchise Act) was passed that allowed all men and women over the age of 21 to vote. Before this, the right to vote depended on someone's social standing. You had to be a property owner, for example. Now, **people of all classes could vote**.

However, even if there wasn't such a big difference in terms of wealth or legal rights, **the same stereotypes and misgivings about the lower classes still remained**. This is what Priestley tries to tackle with his play. Britain had changed on the outside, but many of its feelings and attitudes were preserved from pre-War times. The upper classes, particularly those from noble families, believed they were still **superior** to their lower class counterparts. The country was still divided in many ways, but these divides were ignored. It's possible Priestley thought that ignoring these prejudices was naive and harmful, so he used his play to demonstrate exactly how important it is to eliminate all class divides in Britain.



The Industrial Revolution & Workers' Rights

The **Industrial Revolution** happened over a period of time between 1760 and 1840, but its impacts can still be seen in 1912. It refers to a **transition from manual labour within industry, agriculture, and manufacturing to machinery** and new processes, such as the use of chemicals. This all made **production much more efficient**, and changed the face of Britain's workforce.



The Industrial Revolution was accompanied by **a huge growth in population and income**. Many people moved from the countryside, where they had worked on their personal or local farms, into the cities (urbanisation). Urban spaces became **incredibly cramped**, leading to **poor hygiene** and epidemics like cholera. Many people, particularly the lower classes, started **working in factories**. Many had lost their jobs in agriculture because they were replaced by machines and were forced to move to the cities to find work.

Another impact of the Industrial Revolution was that **a new class emerged**. Before it, Britain's upper classes had all come from 'old money', meaning the wealth had been in the family for decades. Many families were noble or royal in some way, or had respectable jobs like bankers or lawyers. After the Industrial Revolution, a new group of people with 'new money' became known. These were people who had made their fortunes from the new methods of industry - such as by owning factories or starting businesses. The families with 'old money' mostly rejected this 'new money', believing it to be less pure and less respectable because of its origins.

We see evidence of this mindset in 'An Inspector Calls': the Birlings are a manufacturing money, an example of 'new money', whereas the Crofts are members of nobility and possess 'old money'. This causes tension between the two families when Gerald proposes to Sheila.

Workers' Rights & Strikes in 1912

The Industrial Revolution completely **changed the way Britain's workforce was structured**. Before 1760 many people worked in agriculture or in family businesses but suddenly it became commonplace for hundreds of people to work in the same place or for the same person. These employers **controlled wages, work hours, work conditions, and so on**.

Working conditions

Working conditions were atrocious in the early twentieth century. Many working class families lived in **slums** as cities were filled with communities of workers. Some jobs offered workers accommodation, but this was also low quality. Factories and warehouses were dirty and poorly lit. Many didn't have access to clean water or working sewage systems. There was a serious risk of



dying while working because of the dangerous machinery people were exposed to and a lack of health and safety. There wasn't a minimum wage controlled by the law, nor was there a minimum age someone had to be to get work. **Child labour** was a huge issue. Furthermore, there was very little inspection of working conditions and no regulations enforced, as people thought it was wrong for the government to interfere with business matters.

Working women were fined if they left their work area dirty, if they talked, sneezed, used bad language, or made any noise at all. If they worked in shops, there were strict rules about how they had to behave in front of customers. If they were accused of gossiping or being rude to customers, they could lose their jobs. **Moreover, the average salary for women was much less than for men.**

Workers' Rights

Workers were unhappy with how they were being treated, so they started to **group together to improve their rights and working conditions**. Furthermore, the change in industry - from agriculture to manufacturing - meant there needed to be a change in rules and regulations to go with it. **Workers spent most of the twentieth century trying to secure these rights for themselves.** These groups became known as **trade unions**. Trade unions are associations formed and run by workers in the interest of **furthering and protecting workers' rights**. Trade unions are the groups that organise strikes to this day.



For much of the twentieth century, there was strict regulation of trade unions, with some calling for them to be banned. Some of the requests made by workers and trade unions included child labour laws, women's workplace rights, better working conditions, fewer work hours during the week, and higher wages. These demands largely went ignored.

The movement for workers' rights, or **the trade union movement**, was originally met with **resistance**. People didn't like the idea of the working classes demanding something from their employers, and similar attitudes are still seen today. However, with the dawn of the twentieth century, campaigns for workers' rights gained more and more support. The debate surrounding **workers' rights** continued throughout the twentieth century, and we still see its impacts to this day.

Strikes

As said by Mr Birling, the **tension between employers and their employees** grew as Britain entered the 1910s. This growing tension was met with **strikes**. This included the Liverpool general transport strike in 1911, where dockers, railway workers, and sailors forced Liverpool's commerce to stop for most of the summer. This was one of the first examples of trade unions being able to establish themselves and have gathered enough members to make an impact on trade. Another famous strike happened in 1912, called the 'national coal strike of 1912'. Coal miners across the



UK went on strike for 37 days. The main demand was for a minimum wage to be secured for miners. This demand was answered when the government intervened, putting an end to the strike.

Workers' Rights & Strikes in 1945

Workers' rights had improved by 1945, but there was still a long way to go. **Trade unions had gained a lot of traction and attention**, and there was even a **World Federation of Trade Unions**. At the same time, the regulations were much more severe. However, this could be because workers had more rights by this point.

Workers during the war

The two World Wars did a lot to change the way the country viewed workers. The war effort meant the country needed a constant, good supply of machinery, equipment, and weapons. The **number of people working in factories increased** hugely, as did the **number of women in the workforce**.

As more and more men went off to war, it was important for the rate of production to be maintained, so the government had no choice but to **allow women to work**. **Temporary changes** were made to allow women to enter the workforce, have positions of authority, and earn a wage that they could support themselves with. But it was clear that no one intended for these changes to continue after the war. In fact, when the men returned from the war, the women were expected to leave their jobs and return to being housewives. If they didn't, they would be shamed for stealing soldiers' jobs. Equally, men were judged for allowing their wives to work.

Labour government

Labour's implementation of the Welfare State after their election in 1945 was, in many ways, a great success for workers' rights. **They aimed to tackle the issues Beveridge had identified in his report, such as want, squalor, and idleness**. All of these were linked to the issue of workers' rights.

- The government passed the **National Insurance Act** in 1946. Benefits of this included **financial protection for unemployment and sickness**, **pensions for the elderly**, and **standardised minimal living conditions for the employed**.
- The **Industrial Injuries Act** and **National Assistance Act** were also passed that year. These provided **financial relief** for those who were absent from work due to injuries, and assistance for the unemployed in the form of money and standardised minimal living conditions.

Nationalisation

The government **nationalised** Britain's main industries, so they could **create and maintain jobs for the people**. This meant that industries such as steel, gas, coal, and electricity industries, and the railways, were **under government control**. This **stopped mistreatment and exploitation by employers**, and **kept unemployment rates low**. If industries weren't making enough profit, the government could intervene and offer money so no one had to be fired.

Strikes

There were still strikes in 1945. After the war, wages fell, leading to a wave of strikes nationally and internationally. Another cause for outrage was how women were treated. The welfare state was



good overall, but put women at a disadvantage. The government still worked on the basis that a man should earn the money for the family while the wife stayed at home.

Politics

1912

The state of British politics in 1912 was very different than in 1945, but was full of conflict and apprehension. **On the whole, the country was Capitalist and conservative, but unrest and fear were growing.** The growing number of strikes is evidence of this.

The Liberal Party

The prime minister in 1912 was H. H. Asquith, who was the leader of the Liberal Party. The Liberal Party had won the general election in February 1910, but lost their overall majority. They beat the Conservative party by 2 seats. This meant another election was held in December, when the Liberal Party drew with the Conservatives. The Labour party supported the Liberal Party, so the coalition meant the Liberals won the election. This shows how **unstable** parliament was when Priestley set the play.

The Liberal Party was the main **centrist party** in the UK. It had its roots in *laissez-faire* economics and governance. *Laissez-faire* literally means “let do” in French, and is a policy that **advocates for minimal government interference in the economy**. It supports **free trade**, where there is no restriction on imports and exports, and the **free market**, where the price of goods is decided by the market and by consumers. Both of these **benefit Capitalism** as it gives power to business owners and allows for profit to be made freely. Other values of the Liberal Party included social reform, personal liberty, improved voting rights, and restriction of the power of the Crown and Church. All of this was with the power of the individual in mind. Asquith’s government introduced a new aspect to liberalism: that there should be personal liberty, but with government intervention where needed to provide minimum levels of welfare.



Socialist movement

The Labour party was set up in 1901. It started as a **socialist federation**, whose goal was to represent labour (workers) in parliament. By 1903, with support from the Liberal Party, the Labour Party entered mainstream and national politics.



The **growth in popularity of trade unions** is very important when considering politics in 1912. The working classes had found something to believe in. By growing the movement, its leaders hoped to gain a Socialist vote in parliament. This would be a change from parliament's undoubtedly Capitalist ideology. Trade unions also meant that the battle would be between a whole group of men and a whole body of employers within one trade, rather than between isolated employers and their employees.

People's Budget

In 1909, a bill called the 'People's Budget' was passed in the House of Commons. This would introduce **heavier taxes on the wealthy in order to fund social reforms**. However, the bill was blocked by the House of Lords for over a year. By doing this, the House of Lords broke the convention of not overturning financial bills. This was an example of how the elite used their power to silence the people and benefit themselves.

This decision caused great outrage and calls for a reform of the House of Lords. By mid 1911, the government finally managed to **reform** the House of Lords, preventing them from overturning laws that had been passed in the Commons three times in a row.

National Insurance

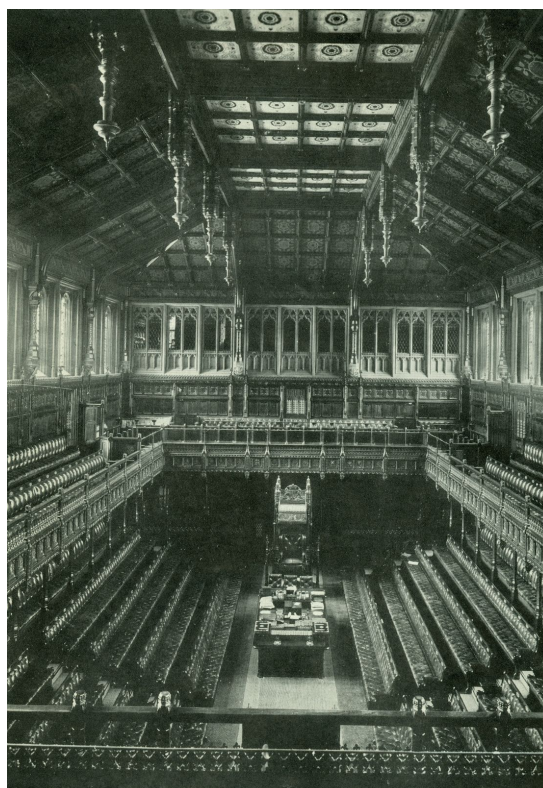
In 1911, the National Insurance Act was passed. This provided some **cover and health insurance** for those in employment, and laid the foundations of the Welfare State. However, these contributions were unsatisfactory when the extent of the issue was considered.

Voting

Voting rights was a big issue for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Both women and the working classes couldn't vote in 1912. This was true despite the many Reform Acts made in the 1800s. There were many **riots and protests** throughout both centuries, and the government was worried about a 'revolution'. By 1912, **the Women's Suffrage Movement had begun**. The current government was put under a lot of **pressure** by the suffragettes, and the matter of suffrage was a big focus for British politics.

World politics

Another issue for British politics in 1912 was the **growing tensions in other countries**. Russia experienced a **revolution** between 1905 and 1907, which included worker strikes and peasant unrest. **Relations with Germany were tense**, and it seemed inevitable that France and Germany would go to war with each other. The whole of Europe was on edge.



1945

An election was held in 1945 after the Second World War ended. Winston Churchill, the Conservative prime minister who had helped Britain through the war, was the expected winner. In an unexpected turn of events, the Labour Party, with Clement Attlee at its head, won in a landslide victory.

Churchill was still a celebrated war hero, but he had **underestimated the British public's desire for change**. The swing between the Conservative Party and the Labour Party was 10.7%, making it the biggest ever swing in a British general election. This reflected the way Britain had changed during the war: the sense of community and cooperation people had gained in the war effort influenced their politics. **The country had become Socialist.**

Another factor for the Conservative's loss was the state of the country before the war, in the 1930s. There had been **high unemployment** and **distrust of the Party's domestic and foreign policies**. Though people respected Churchill, they believed he was good in the context of war. The post-war future was a different matter. People needed change, and confidence that Britain wouldn't return to its pre-war state. Labour provided this: its manifesto was titled 'Let Us Face the Future'.

Furthermore, the British people didn't trust the Conservatives to properly provide for the soldiers and armed forces who returned after the war. After the First World War, **soldiers had returned to unemployment and homelessness**. Measures hadn't been taken to help veterans rehabilitate and recover. As the NHS didn't exist, it was also hard for them to recover from any injuries or PTSD they suffered from. People felt that though the war had been won, the peace had been lost. This contributed to the feeling that the authorities had sent innocent men into battle without caring for them as individuals. On the other hand, Labour, in the 1945 election, **promised to 'win the peace'**.

The new prime minister, Attlee, claimed that Labour's victory marked the first time the British public had voted in a government with explicitly Socialist policies. It was also the first election where Labour won a **majority of seats and the popular vote**. It was undeniable: Britain had changed. A new era was beginning. It is this hope for a new Britain that Priestley alludes to in 'An Inspector Calls'.

Social reform

The Labour Party's most successful policy in 1945 was the **aim for social reform**. This included improved housing, full employment, social security, and nationalisation.

The Beveridge Report was published in 1942, and proposed the **creation of a welfare state**. Labour acted on Beveridge's recommendations. The welfare state meant that the government was more involved in people's lives, but for the better: **measures were taken to ensure the safety, wellbeing, and stability of civilians**. The welfare state included **nationalised healthcare** (now known as the NHS), **state-funded education**, **National Insurance** (a tax paid by workers and employers that funded state benefits, providing insurance against illness and unemployment), and **a new housing policy**. This welfare state was a huge change from previous social policy in Britain.



Other Labour policies included **protecting the right to protest** and giving people the freedom of association, e.g. through trade unions.

In the late nineteenth century, collective protest and trade unions had been legalised and recognised, but not protected. In places such as Nazi Germany, trade unions were banned. As the Labour Party had the interests of workers at its core, it wanted to improve working conditions, such as hours, pay, and factory conditions. The party also believed in wealth redistribution by taxing the rich, and providing government intervention when needed. Labour's association with trade unions can still be seen today.



Voting rights

Voting rights had transformed a lot since 1912. The Representation of the People Act, passed in 1918, allowed all men over the age of 21 to vote. This **opened politics up to the working classes** who had previously been banned from voting because they didn't own property.

The Act also allowed all women over the age of 30 who owned property to vote. This meant working class women were still barred from voting. However, in 1928, the fifth Reform Act passed. This gave women the vote on the same terms as men. Finally, suffrage was an even playing field.

Capitalism vs. Socialism

Capitalism and Socialism are **two opposing economic and cultural systems that determine how people make their money and how the government is run**. In 1945, Britain saw a direct conflict and eventual switch between the two, with a previously Capitalist country adopting many Socialist policies after the war. Though Socialism isn't the direct opposite to Capitalism, **the two are often seen to be in conflict**.

Capitalism

The definition of Capitalism that is most relevant to the play and most useful in understanding Priestley's viewpoint is Joyce Appleby's: *"An economic system that relies on investment of capital in machines and technology that are used to increase production of marketable goods"*.

We see this in 'An Inspector Calls' when Mr Birling mentions his factory, the interests of Capital, and his hope for progress (such as his views on the Titanic). Capitalism encourages innovation, engineering, and pioneering as ways to improve efficiency and make goods cheaper to make. It relies on people's **ability to take risks and invest**. The whole system revolves around **turning a profit**, which means employers and business owners look for any way possible to **lower the cost**



of manufacturing. In the **free market**, the price of goods is decided by the **supply and demand from consumers**.

Capitalism works on **competition** between business owners and employers. In a Capitalist economy, the **means of production** are **owned by private entities**. These private entities compete to make the **highest profit**, by selling goods at the highest price and keeping production costs as low as possible. This is why **child labour**, **low wages**, and **long work hours** became the norm in Britain. Without government intervention, Capitalist culture was allowed to **exploit others for profit**.

The competitiveness of Capitalism **encourages inequality and oppression**. Inequality means business owners have fewer threats. Some may rig the system, creating barriers that prevent certain groups of people from ever entering the market. In Capitalism, those with money keep winning, while those at the bottom of the pecking order get poorer. Another issue with Capitalism is that **people who aren't skilled or can't work are at a disadvantage**. Children, the elderly, and the disabled aren't provided for. Equally, there isn't an equal opportunity for everyone to succeed. Those in poverty or without a good education stand little chance of succeeding, so cannot improve their living situation.

Socialism

Socialism started out as an **intellectual theory** created by Karl Marx in the late nineteenth century. He argued that the struggle between classes is what makes classes into themselves. This means that without conflict, there wouldn't be **class consciousness** - people wouldn't be aware of class if there was no struggle between them.

When Marx was writing in the 1800s, England had two main classes: the workers and the Capitalists. This is still very much true in 1912, when the play was set. The struggle between the Capitalists' desire to pay as little as possible for work and the workers' desire to be paid as much as possible for their work means it is impossible for both groups to be happy, and so there is a permanent divide between them.

Marx's theory of Socialism was grounded in the human need to socialise. He believed that as human beings, we collaborate, and we are at our most efficient when we work together and share resources. Unlike Capitalism, that encouraged conflict, Marx wanted his theory of Socialism to **encourage cooperation and the empowerment of the worker**. He wanted to value the well-being of the many over the well-being of the individual, and **protect collective interest**. His ideas quickly became famous, and Priestley would have been aware of Marx's books and theories.

In Socialism, the factors of production are owned equally by everyone in society. **Value of goods and factors of production is determined by their usefulness to people**. A Socialist system considers both the **needs of the individual and greater social needs**, such as health care. Measures are also taken to provide for those who cannot work, such as the elderly. Because everyone owns the means of production, workers aren't exploited. People can **cooperate** rather than compete. **Socialism enables equality and eliminates poverty**.



Historically, there has been a lot of tension between Capitalists and Socialists. Capitalists view Socialism as a threat to innovation, business, and progress. Socialism and Communism have gained a bad reputation because of the far-left dictatorships of the twentieth century.

World Events

1912

In 1912, Britain was experiencing a time of great change, progress, and excitement.

The 1910s decade followed the end of the Victorian era, so society was still

benefiting from the discoveries made in

those years. The new century had brought with it a great air of optimism for some, but war was brewing.

Health and Safety

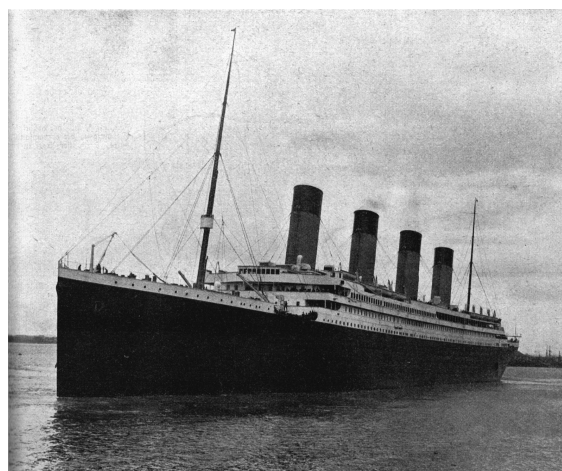
In March, 1911, a clothing factory in New York City where 500 workers - mostly young women - worked caught fire. Locked doors, a faulty fire escape, and poor working conditions meant 146 people died in the fire. The cramped conditions and flammable materials in the factory meant what was initially a small fire grew rapidly. The tragedy led to building, fire, and safety codes being made. It drew attention to the awful treatment of workers, particularly the treatment of young women and immigrants.

The Titanic

1912's most infamous event is the **sinking of the *Titanic***. The *Titanic* was a huge White Star liner, celebrated for being the biggest of its kind. It was claimed that the ship was **unsinkable**. It had more than 2000 passengers on its maiden voyage to New York. Many of these passengers were members of the aristocracy and upper classes, but the ship had three classes of passenger overall, alongside crew.

It sank in mid April after striking an iceberg in the Atlantic Ocean, killing over 1500 people. There was a lot of controversy surrounding the rescue

attempts: those in the upper classes were put onto lifeboats first, leaving any staff and crew to drown. Very few of the third-class passengers ever made it above deck, let alone onto lifeboats. Many lifeboats were launched before they held their maximum loads. There was also outrage over the lax regulations and lack of lifeboats.



EXAM TIP

Looking at the major events that took place both during and in the lead up to 1912 or 1945 is a good way to tell what society was like at the time. Historic events can reflect and influence people's opinions and attitudes. For example, the wave of strikes shows how workers were unhappy.



1945

World news was dominated by the war in 1945, as it had been since the war began. This meant the news was full of stories of tragedies and battles, such as the Nazi concentration camps, the Atomic Bombings in Japan, and the attack on Pearl Harbour.

On D-Day, 6th June 1944, the Allies successfully landed in Normandy, leading to the liberation of Europe from the Nazis. The war ended in 1945. Major leaders came together, founding the United Nations. With the end of World War Two, there were uplifting tales that boosted national morale. The concentration camps were liberated. This was overall a positive event, but the liberation of the camps allowed the Allies to discover what the Nazis had done. Before this point, the extent of the Holocaust had not been known. The world prepared to face the future and start to recover from the destruction of two World Wars and the Great Depression.

Women's Rights

1912

The **recognition of women's rights** hadn't changed from the Victorian era, though the movement for Women's Suffrage had grown a lot. Women were universally considered to be inferior to men.

They were **under the control of their fathers** until they married, at which point they were **under the control of their husbands**. According to English law, a husband and wife became one person upon their marriage. This meant all a woman's property was given to her husband, and she lost her legal identity. It was rare for a woman to inherit any wealth or land from her family: it was automatically passed to the closest male heir.



In terms of legal rights, women had none. They couldn't vote. They couldn't own property if they were unmarried. Before 1882, even married women hadn't been allowed to own property. They couldn't work outside the home if they were married.

The Married Women's Property Act of 1882 **allowed married women to own property** and **keep their legal identity**, but much of the stigma and prejudice remained. It was still rare for women to inherit property, wealth, or businesses. Even by 1912, women still couldn't inherit or bequeath (leave to someone in your will) property on the same terms that men could.



Domestic Role

Women were expected to remain and succeed in the private sphere, meaning the home. They weren't expected to be seen in social situations, and if they were, they should be **quiet and agreeable**. It was the husband's job to engage with work, politics, and current affairs. It was believed that **women weren't capable or intelligent enough** to do the same. The husband worked to provide the money ('win the bread') for the family, while the wife stayed at home and did domestic duties.

Though women weren't given a formal education, they still had to be incredibly skilled. They had to be good wives and mothers, which included having dinner on the table in time for their husbands' return from work, keeping the house clean, laundry, and raising their children.

If a woman was upper class, she could have staff to run the household but she was still in charge of keeping the servants in check. She was the woman of the house, so she would set the chores and tasks for the servants. Upper class women might be educated in 'feminine' skills, such as embroidery, Latin, and dancing. All of this education was provided so that they could **attract a husband**.

Dependence on men

Women had to **rely on their husbands** for **economic and social security**. Their husbands' jobs, statuses, and contacts **determined their social standing**. It was hard for them to get work, particularly hard to get work that paid well. This meant their husband had to provide for them. There were certain jobs that women couldn't have. They weren't allowed to work in the legal profession, for example by serving on a jury or being a magistrate, and they couldn't work for the civil service. These were both jobs that gathered a lot of respect, associated with the upper classes and well-educated. Women also couldn't open a bank account or apply for a loan in their own name. This was because they were viewed as 'high-risk investments' by banks. Worst of all, **women weren't entitled to equal pay**. No law was put in place to protect female employees, meaning they had no legal right to be treated the same as their male counterparts in the workplace.

Divorce

Although divorce was possible in theory, many women had no choice but to stay married. If they did get a divorce, they would be shunned by society, and likely would end up starving and homeless.

Domestic Violence

Issues surrounding **sexual and domestic violence** are still unresolved today, but the situation was much worse for women in 1912. There was no legal protection for female victims of domestic violence, meaning women couldn't get a court order against their violent husbands. Equally, rape within marriage was not a criminal offence. Wives were the property of their husbands, and they could do with their wives as they wished. Society believed a man was entitled to his wife's sexuality and body.



Abortion

It was illegal to perform or assist with abortions. This meant women had to use unsafe, dangerous methods if they needed an abortion. Even if a woman wanted to keep her child, she was by no means safe. The number of women who died in childbirth per 1000 total births was around 40 - that's compared to fewer than 10 per 100000 births today.

Women's Suffrage Movement

The Women's Suffrage Movement started in the early nineteenth century, and by 1912 it had grown into a well-known movement. Groups, such as The Women's Social and Political Union, were formed, and petitions sent to parliament **demanding the right for women to vote**. When these were ignored, marches, protests, and riots were organised. Many suffragettes were arrested during their fight for suffrage.



The Women's Suffrage Movement was, of course, met with a lot of outrage. People, including women, thought it was ridiculous and dangerous for a woman to involve herself with politics. They worried women would **stop performing their duties as a wife and mother**, and might be driven insane. The prime minister in 1912, H. H. Asquith, was openly anti-suffragist.

Anti-suffragist groups, such as The Women's National Anti-Suffrage League, were formed. Some of these leagues were formed by women.

In 1910, a bill that would grant suffrage to one million women who owned property over the value of £10, was passed by the Commons. Yet, it didn't become law. However, prime minister Asquith's male suffrage bill of 1911 would give all men the right to vote. The suffragettes were outraged, as it was clear the government was ignoring them.



The protests and riots grew more frequent, destructive, and violent, including window-smashing and arson. In 1912, a bill was proposed that would give the vote to some women. It was defeated. That same month, the Labour Party became the first political party to make women's suffrage a formal policy in their manifesto. This could have meant that, for some, women's suffrage was associated

with left-wing politics and Socialist policies. Many viewed women's suffrage as a **threat to order and functioning society**.

1945

Women's rights had come a long way by 1945. This is largely attributed to the war effort, as women took men's jobs and therefore were **recognised as worthwhile workers and members of society**. However, how much the war effort really contributed to the Women's Suffrage Movement is debatable. Many of the changes made in the war years were clearly not intended to be permanent. Without the efforts of the suffragettes, women's right to vote likely wouldn't have come for decades.

The years after 1912 were pivotal for the Women's Suffrage Movement. The suffragettes were making real waves in British culture and politics.

- Emily Davison was killed after stepping out in front of the King's horse at Epsom Derby, and thousands attended her funeral.
- Hundreds of thousands took part in marches and rallies.
- In 1916, Asquith made a declaration of allegiance to the Women's Suffrage Movement, meaning he supported the cause.
- In 1918, the Representation of the People Bill was passed, allowing women over the age of 30 and men over the age of 21 to vote. This led to women becoming MPs and cabinet ministers.
- In 1928, this extended to everyone over the age of 21, meaning women finally had the same voting rights as men.

Many of the laws that restricted women from participating equally in society in 1912 were overturned. Women could now **hold and dispose of property on the same terms as men**, and could **inherit property from their husbands**. They could serve as a magistrate or on a jury. It was now illegal for women to be barred from certain careers based on their gender. However, women still couldn't open a bank account in their own name, and they still didn't have the right to equal pay.

World War II

Again, when World War Two broke out, women were called to help with the war effort. More and more entered the workforce, until over 7 million women were involved with war work. Their jobs involved working in the Auxiliary Territorial Service, the Women's Land Army, and Special Operations Executives, with many others working in metal and chemical industries. This meant women occupied typically 'male' roles. Women were also pivotal to cracking the Enigma code, but their involvement was kept as a government secret until much later. Throughout all this, though, women were still expected to run their homes. They had to shop, clean, feed their families, and "make do and mend" after a long day at work.

Despite women's contribution to the war effort, once the war ended, they were **expected to make way for the soldiers returning home**. Once again, their roles in society were meant to be temporary, a measure taken only during wartime. The woman's role as domestic angel was emphasised once again, and many women returned to being housewives.



In many professions, married women weren't allowed to work. Marital rape was still legal, and abortion still illegal. On the other hand, the number of divorces increased rapidly after the war. This was for many reasons, but one of the most relevant is that women felt they should have a say in their own lives.



Getting the vote was not the end of women's fight for equality. For starters, the expectations for upper class and lower class women were still incredibly different. Gender roles still controlled society. Women had to be wives and mothers, and these unwritten rules prevented more progress being made for decades after the war. A second wave of feminism was beginning, but it wasn't until the 1960s that women managed to bring society's attention to their demands once more.

