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Distilling the Frenzy. Writing the History of One's Own Times

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Kevin Jefferys

The jacket cover of Peter Hennessy's new work describes the author as 'the UK's leading contemporary historian', a reputation soundly based on a string of highly regarded books such as *Cabinet*, *The Hidden Wiring*, *Whitehall* and *The Secret State*, as well as on his high profile as a media presenter and commentator. In *Distilling the Frenzy*, a title adapted from a quotation by John Maynard Keynes, the author reflects on his career as a journalist, academic and, since 2010, a crossbench member of the House of Lords as Lord Hennessy of Nympsfield. The bulk of the dozen or so main chapters revisit Hennessy's long-standing areas of historical interest: Britain's place on the world stage during the 20th and 21st centuries (including the role of diplomacy and intelligence activities); the functioning of central government at Westminster and in Whitehall; and what the author calls 'the utility of history to government and governed alike' (p. 5). There's much on offer here that close followers of Hennessy's work will be familiar with, though much also to admire and provoke.

Among those parts of the book dealing with the first of the main themes, Britain's place in the world, chapter three explores the 'instinct to intervene' that has long been characteristic of leading policy makers and officials. There's a particular focus on the various defence reviews carried out since the end of Second World War, providing a context for Hennessy to depict the most recent, carried out as part of the programme

of austerity reductions by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition in 2010, as the most inadequate: 'a fistful of spending reviews overlaid by a thin patina of strategy' (p. 28). On the other hand, the author welcomes the fact that, despite a declining proportion of GDP being devoted to defence (down from 4.7 per cent in the mid 1950s to 2.7 per cent today), British governments of various political hues have sought to punch above the nation's weight in a post-imperial age. For Hennessy this has sometimes led to unfortunate consequences (he regards the Iraq war as the most prominent example in recent times), but on the whole British leaders have acted as a moderating force in global counsels, making he feels for a 'non-heroic, unflashy approach to diplomatic influence'.

The chapter which follows, subtitled 'the shadow of the bomb', inflects the story of Britain's commitment to nuclear defence with Hennessy's own experience of growing up in the Cold War era. As a child of the 'uranium age', he says, he early on developed a fascination with how an ambitious programme was devised and developed by politicians, military leaders and officials from the moment Attlee took the secret decision to follow the American lead at the end of the Second World War. Hennessy here ventures into the world of prediction, claiming that 50 years from now Britain is still likely to have nuclear submarines 'a view called more into question since 2010 owing to the scale of the nation's deficit than perhaps at any point in the author's lifetime.

As far as the operation of central government (the second of the three major themes) is concerned, Hennessy's chapter subtitled 'watching prime ministers' analyses a curious contrast: while the office of Number Ten contains the 'greatest single parcel of concentrated personal power' in the British system, Downing Street incumbents are often characterised by acute insecurity. Asquith is quoted as once saying of power: 'you think you are going to get it but you never do' (p. 103). By providing an in-depth comparison of prime ministerial functions in 1947 and 1995, the author shows that the 'stretching' of the premiership was relentless in the post-war period, particularly in relation to responsibility for nuclear defence. Although the rate of acquiring additional duties has slowed down since the mid-1990s, the story remains that of 'one-way traffic. An extra job is rarely balanced by a function shed'. Hennessy is reluctant to conclude that the job of prime minister is a poisoned chalice, but he does note that leaders from Asquith to Macmillan and Gordon Brown have all felt the same; after honeymoon periods, for much of their time they were unable to enjoy the powers they possessed, and found leadership a 'precarious and constantly anxiety-inducing business' (p. 122).

Perhaps the freshest insights into the workings of Westminster come in Hennessy's long review of the role and functions of the House of Lords, where he's able to reflect on the basis of first-hand experience since his elevation to the peerage. This chapter highlights the author's sense of fun and showmanship: his liking, as 'one of nature's peacocks', for the ceremonial aspects of life in the upper chamber, as well as his delight at finding himself as a constitutional historian in the 'wonderfully gilded laboratory' of the Lords at a moment when reform was on the agenda as part of the 2010 Coalition agreement. Hennessy writes with wry amusement about the numerous failed attempts at Lords' reform going back to the early 20th century, while also providing telling observations as to how and why attempts at reform since 2011 have largely disappeared into a 'constitutional Bermuda Triangle' (pp. 135 and 138).

Most of the remaining chapters relate to the third theme: that of the role and purpose of history for those in power and the broader public. The material under this umbrella heading tends to be more personal and autobiographical. In the first chapter, for example, the author describes his early life 'born into a Catholic family in north London in 1947, attending grammar school and Cambridge' and the origins of his fascination with particular aspects of the British political experience. The 'place-in-the-world question', he notes, 'has gripped me since the Suez autumn of 1956' (p. 13). Chapter two follows this up with a short but impassioned defence of the value of studying the recent past. While recognising that contemporary history has many of the same merits and characteristics as all forms of history, Hennessy emphasises the particular allure of making sense of 'your own time', trying to appreciate it and understand it 'while avoiding excessive patterning, mono-causal explanations or the condescending and patronising urge to tell the veterans how they should have felt if only they had thought about it harder' (p. 20).

Hennessy notes that several of Britain's most prominent statesmen have been fascinated by history – three obvious examples being Churchill, Macmillan and Roy Jenkins – and this leads him to give considerable attention to the issue of the value of historical reflection to serving politicians. On this, he is firm: 'History, I am convinced, has a high and continuous utility for policy-makers both ministerial and official; though it can never be more than a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition of seriously increasing the chance of better outcomes' (p. 22). Hennessy endorses an idea floated at a seminar of the great and good in 2011 by former Cabinet Secretary Lord Butler, who argued that Whitehall departments would benefit from having a chief historical adviser, a person who could produce swiftly digestible 'road maps' of how a current policy position had been arrived at, who could point to key official documents and historical works to illuminate issues under discussion, and who could 'speak truth unto power', especially in situations where national security was endangered. The prospects for such a development are remote, Hennessy acknowledges. Austerity cuts since 2010 make any such initiative unlikely, and indeed have resulted in the curtailment of the long-standing programme in Whitehall of producing 'official' departmental histories. Even so, he hopes history will still be regarded as an ingredient in good policy-making, helping to prevent oversimplified, distorted and self-serving views of the past. 'But history?', he adds in an important qualification, 'is not the carrier of special insights with great predictive power. It is a horizon-scanner's aid not a crystal ball. The very best it can offer is Braudel's thin wisps of tomorrow' (p. 187).

There are some curiosities in *Distilling the Frenzy*. Specialist readers might question the need for the inclusion of lengthy timelines, for example the 20-page chronology charting the evolution of nuclear weapons policy from the Second World War to the present day. Others might feel the author's focus could have been extended at times beyond the role of ministers and officials, taking in topics such as the purpose and status of backbench MPs in the wake of the expenses scandal. And not everyone will share some of Hennessy's conclusions or his prediction that 50 years from now policy makers will still make strenuous efforts, as they did for much of the 20th century, to ensure Britain continues to punch above its weight on the world stage. At the same time, the virtues that have long characterised Hennessy's scholarship are all here: the breadth of knowledge and interest; the striking turn of phrase; and the ability (at a time when academics are required to demonstrate 'REF impact' in wider society) to reach out to non-academic audiences, seeking to ensure that history is regarded as fun while also conveying serious and thought-provoking lessons. He writes as someone who regards as 'the greatest shared boon' of his lifetime that of coming through a period when nuclear conflagration seemed a real possibility. Britain, despite its chequered past and current divisions, remains in his eyes a tolerant, open society in which history continues to flourish inside and outside of academia. For Peter Hennessy, there is much to be thankful for in 'writing the history of one's own times'.

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