

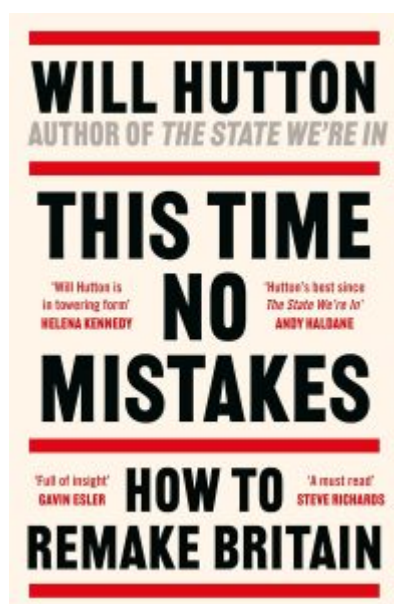
# This Time No Mistakes: How to Remake Britain – review

*In This Time No Mistakes, Will Hutton examines the causes of Britain's political and economic dysfunction and calls for a new public philosophy combining social democracy and progressive liberalism to redress current crises. Though in places Hutton misses opportunities to further develop his arguments, he nevertheless sets out a compelling vision for a better Britain and the steps that could be taken to achieve it, writes **Tom Stephens**.*

Will Hutton launched the book at LSE in April. [Watch it back on YouTube](#).

[This Time No Mistakes: How to Remake Britain. Will Hutton. Apollo. 2024.](#)

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What should be done to turn around modern Britain? How should the country be governed? And what philosophy could unite a wide spectrum of progressives behind a shared vision? These are the questions at the centre of Hutton's exceptionally well-timed book on the problems Britain faces today, and how they should be fixed.

*This Time No Mistakes* can effectively be split into two parts – half diagnosis (Chapters

1-7); and half prescription (Chapters 8-13). The central argument is that we need a public philosophy marrying social democracy with progressive liberalism if we are to solve Britain's current problems – and to provide a bulwark against resurgent right-wing populism, which “only produces electoral results in the fertile soil of economic and social distress” (58).

The first six chapters take the reader through modern British history. Britain's current problems, he argues, can be traced back to the incubation of a flawed *laissez-faire* ideology about how to run the British state and economy. Despite being resoundingly disproven and rejected by the late-1940s, this ideology was allowed to reinvent itself in the 1960s and '70s through the union of “conservatives” and “‘true’ classical liberals” (37), before fundamentally re-shaping British and US society in the 1980s.

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Seen from this perspective, the fatal adventurism of Truss' six-week premiership is portrayed not as an anomaly, but as the logical culmination of this damaging thinking (ix). It has left Britain in a crisis which is “qualitatively more threatening” than any of the economic crises of the past century (3) and worse-equipped to deal with it than ever due to our relegated status as a *de facto* “developmental state – more like an emergent than a developed economy” (255). It has pushed our public services to breaking point and deprived the country of public investment and a coherent industrial strategy. It has left us with a distinctly damaging form of capitalism: over-dependent on banking services, short-termist in its approach to investment, and with little interest in supporting the British economy (259-262) or its workforce (309-311).

However, these chapters are also an account of the failure of British progressives to provide an alternative, effectively ceding the governance of the country to the right. He suggests that at various points in British history, either socialist or liberal thinkers have offered the correct answers to the country's problems, but hesitancy and political divisions have prevented their actualisation. For most of its history “liberalism failed itself and the country” (125). By the 1930s, New Liberal thinkers – led by Keynes – had the tools needed to deliver a British New Deal during the Great Depression, but Labour under Ramsay MacDonald proved bereft of ideas and “lacked the self-confidence and the will to make dysfunctional capitalism work better.” (151). Only the Atlee Labour

Government brought these two traditions together, building a welfare state based largely on New Liberal thinking under the banner of socialism.

[Hutton] credits New Labour with delivering vital public investment, but criticises their hesitancy in advancing an alternative public philosophy, their weakness on electoral reform and other social issues, and their failure to reform capitalism

These failings have continued in various guises, and between various sides of the progressive movement, throughout the post-war decades. For example, he credits New Labour with delivering vital public investment, but criticises their hesitancy in advancing an alternative public philosophy, their weakness on electoral reform and other social issues, and their failure to reform capitalism – with the disastrous consequence, he argues, that most of their social policies were easily reversed from 2010-2024 (204).

The solution, Hutton argues (Chapter 7), is a new “public philosophy” which brings together both progressive traditions (210). This philosophy needs to accept the importance of individual agency and aspirations (“the ‘I’”), whilst also recognising how we are all inter-connected and interdependent (“the ‘We’”). Distancing himself from the “libertarian liberalism” of [John Stuart Mill](#), he cites New Liberal thinkers such as [Thomas Hill Green](#) as his inspiration – arguing that “the common good, and the ability of individuals to live lives they value and find meaningful, are interdependent” (130). He also frequently draws from [Rawls’ conception of social justice](#) (124, 131, 189, 228-9). From the left, he draws from [R. H. Tawney’s](#) and [Evan Durbin’s](#) critiques of British capitalism (164-168), whilst from the centre he draws from [Keynes’ economics](#) (180-1). He suggests this philosophy is paramount in today’s technological and AI-driven age – providing a framework for ensuring capitalism brings benefits to all rather than accumulating wealth to the few (213-220).

[A social justice-oriented] philosophy is paramount in today’s technological and AI-driven age – providing a framework for ensuring capitalism brings benefits to all rather than accumulating wealth to the few

It is perhaps here that Hutton’s book is at its weakest. He falls short of articulating a comprehensive theory of wellbeing; his chapter on his philosophical vision of “the ‘We society’” is the shortest in the book. His philosophy appears to be positioned remarkably

close to Amartya Sen's [Capability Approach](#) – his emphasis on “individual agency” (374) and the importance of people living “lives they value” (130) could be taken almost word-for-word from [Sen's writings](#). At points, he argues that welfare state intervention could be freedom-enhancing, suggesting that the post-WWII reconstruction “did a better job at protecting essential freedoms” than conservatives did (37). He misses an opportunity to develop this into a bolder, more coherent framework. Tellingly, he ultimately puts productivity at the heart of his strategy to turn Britain around (232), although he does argue the Treasury's fiscal rules should be changed to account for social value and natural assets (250-51).

There are other issues. He emphasises the state's role in managing risks, and suggests Beveridge's original design for social insurance could provide the basis for a politically sustainable welfare state (174-175), but doesn't engage with thinkers who could add weight to this argument (e.g. Barr's '[Economics of the Welfare State](#)'). He discusses the importance of “social capital” later in his book, and the vital part government plays in fostering it (280-282), but a sociologist might note his use of [Putnam's ideas](#) (326) rather than for example Bourdieu's [more radical conceptualisation](#) of capitals. He highlights the central need to reform capitalism rather than taking [a Croslandite approach](#) of redistributing wealth from an unreformed private sector (98), but could have engaged with debates over how to accomplish such a challenging, society-wide task – as in the [Varieties of Capitalism](#) literature.

Nevertheless, the reader can very clearly connect diagnosis and prescription. In addition to tackling poverty and inequality (Chapters 11-12), progressives must recognise that “British capitalism certainly needs to change” (255) and understand the state's need to drive up investment and productivity. This means increasing public investment and spending *now* to provide the basis for a thriving public *and* private sector in the future (244, 367). The last five chapters come thick and fast with policies. He calls, amongst other things, for unlocking new sources of finance such as dormant defined benefit pension funds and creating a UK sovereign wealth fund (253, 267); radical reforms to create purposive private enterprise, so firms are compelled to solely to deliver value to society and not just shareholders (271-274); a push to deliver “good work”, which receives an encouraging amount of attention in his book (266-291); and a raft of political reforms to decentralise power and restore faith in politics, such as a statutory Commission for Standards (357).

## An ascendant far-right in Europe and a potential Trump victory in the US risk undermining Hutton's blueprint for a closer UK-EU relationship

In short, he sets up the intractable problems Britain faces very well. But this poses the obvious question: are we too far gone? Maybe “things can only get worse”? Events may serve to constrain the new Government in ways Hutton couldn't predict. An ascendant far-right in Europe and a potential Trump victory in the US risk undermining Hutton's blueprint for a closer UK-EU relationship (360-361) and making the world even less secure than when the book went to print. He also offers a new Government little advice about how to reconcile all the policies he proposes, simply acknowledging it is “a generational task” but that “improvements should be obvious by the end of the first Parliament” (367).

Nevertheless, Hutton can be excused for pitching for hope rather than despair. The book succeeds in setting out a vision for what could be, and how we could get there. His argument for a union of progressive thought – that “fellowship and individual agency are not incompatible values” (374) – is compelling. Whilst understandably incomplete, this is a thought-provoking and powerful prospectus – worthy of careful consideration by politicians, policymakers, and academics alike.

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**Note:** *This review gives the views of the author and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

In May, Will Hutton wrote a piece for LSE British Politics and Policy on whether Starmer's government can avoid the mistakes of the past. [Read it here](#).

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