Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: Harvey Morris

Britain's enduring nostalgia for its 'finest hour'

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has learned to his cost the perils of failing to make due obeisance to a World War II heritage that continues to define the self-image of the British eight decades after the conflict ended.

At the weekend, an embattled Sunak retreated from the media frontline after what had been the worst week of an already fraught general election campaign.

The PM's crime, for which he swiftly apologised, was to have skipped out early from the 80th anniversary D-Day ceremony in Normandy to commemorate the start of the allied liberation of Europe in order to give a pre-arranged television interview.

His absence was widely condemned as a crass insult to the dwindling band of D-Day veterans who made it to the event, and to the memory of their fallen comrades. In one snap poll, almost 7 out of 10 respondents agreed that Sunak's behaviour was unacceptable.

Every nation creates its own identity, based on history and myth and often linked to past military victories, or even on occasion to defeats. This can be a positive phenomenon if it engenders a sense of solidarity and common purpose.

But it can also be negative, when exploited by ultra-nationalists and other charlatans to whip up a sense of national superiority.

British nostalgia

Vladimir Putin has manipulated the history of what Russians know as the Great Patriotic War to cast his country as once more a target of aggression from the west, justifying his invasion of what he terms "neo-Nazi" Ukraine.

British nostalgia for the glory days of World War II is generally much more benign, which is not to say it cannot also be pernicious.

The fact that island Britain was not invaded meant it did not suffer the traumas of occupation, collaboration and displacement visited on its European neighbours, which is not to overlook the devastation of British cities in the airborne blitz or the loss of more than 380,000 soldiers killed in combat.

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The belief that the country stood alone in 1940 as Europe fell to the Axis advance continues to fuel a feeling of British exceptionalism, linked to the inspiring rhetoric of wartime leader Winston Churchill who offered an immediate future of "blood, toil, tears and sweat".

Within days of Churchill's inaugural speech as prime minister, the first of more than 300,000 retreating allied soldiers were being plucked from the beaches of Dunkirk, some by small boats and their civilian crews.

Politicians and headliner writers still tend to evoke the "Dunkirk spirit" whenever a community comes together to face adversity, whether it is local flooding or a Covid pandemic.

For many born at the end or immediately after the war, their earliest memories are of family gatherings at which their elders endlessly relived their wartime experiences.

The "blitz spirit"

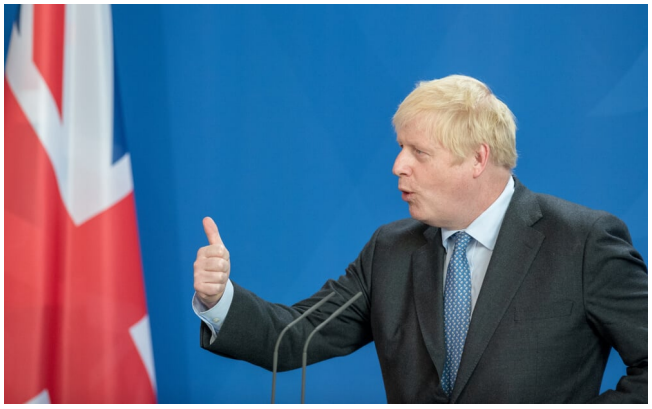
The garrulousness of the participants tended to be in inverse proportion to the horrors they had witnessed. Those who had endured the privations of the Home Front and kept the home fires burning would almost regret the war years when everyone pulled together and you could still rely on your neighbours.

In the midst of post-war austerity, food rationing and blitzed urban landscapes, there emerged a strange nostalgia for the war years. Had they not been a time when even political rivals had come together to face a common

enemy, even as they drew up plans for a brighter post-war future?

Some of that nostalgia has persisted over decades of domestic political change and the dissolution of an empire that Churchill had hoped the conflict might have helped to sustain.

Politicians and commentators born in the 1960s or later will still shamelessly evoke the wartime experience, sometimes to lecture the callow youth or to encourage self-sacrifice from the public, as if they themselves had lived it.



The image of wartime Britain standing alone against the tyrant was inevitability raised in the Brexit debate over ties with Europe - Boris Johnson

The "blitz spirit" was evoked during the Covid emergency and after the London terrorist bombings of 2005 to summon legendary British stoicism in the face of adversity.

The image of wartime Britain standing alone against the tyrant was inevitability raised in the Brexit debate over ties with Europe and in the messy aftermath of the 2016 referendum.

Ahead of the referendum, Boris Johnson accused the European Union of trying to create a superstate, as Hitler had.

"Napoleon, Hitler, various people tried this out, and it ends tragically. The EU is an attempt to do this by different methods."

The future prime minister and Churchill biographer spent so much time referencing Britain's wartime leader that he came to be regarded as a pale parody of the great man.

The old myths

Even as Britain bids farewell to the generation that actually experienced the war, it can sometimes feel as if at least part of the country still lives spiritually in the 1940s, while the rest of the world has moved on.

As the historian Hew Strachan wrote at the time of the 75th D-Day anniversary in 2019: "The Second World War has become mythologised as part of a story Britain tells about itself."

> Politicians could make a start by not automatically grasping for wartime metaphors to underscore their arguments

He was introducing research by the Royal United Services Institute showing the public's profound reverence, but also its sometimes striking ignorance about Britain's involvement in the war. Only half could correctly identify the significance of D-Day.

It may be time to dump some of the old myths. Politicians could make a start by not automatically grasping for wartime metaphors to underscore their arguments.

For there is a hint of declinism in Britain's enduring obsession with the war, a sense that the nation will never quite regain the status and shared purpose of the 1940s, an acknowledgment that in the wide sweep of British history this was indeed, in Churchill's words, "their finest hour".