Deep continuity as well as radical change have marked the century since the outbreak of the First World War. Aspects of 1914’s business and finance, social class, public attitudes and party politics still look remarkably similar. Yet the country that mobilised in August that year was also profoundly reshaped by the war that followed, by the second global war that began in 1939, and the subsequent course of 20th-century history.

The country, which then included the entire island of Ireland, was counted 42 million citizens in 1911. Now, 64 million in population, it remains a monarchy, but allows women to vote. Society has been remade by migration, divorce, smaller family size; technology, energy, transport and communications reshaped work and leisure.

When Herbert Asquith and his Liberal cabinet declared war on Germany and Austro-Hungary, economics, sociology, psychology, geography and the other disciplines had advanced. But the map of knowledge had scant space for ‘social sciences’. Their growth is part of the great expansion in knowledge and data during the century; during 1914-18 we find the origins of the research councils themselves. We asked social scientists to pick out threads and patterns from the tapestry of the past 100 years.
The Edwardians were already anxious about industrial performance, notes Professor Nick Crafts, Director of the ESRC’s research Centre on Competitive Advantage in the Global Economy (CAGE) at the University of Warwick.

Industrial structure was skewed to the old export staples of cotton, ships and coal, mainly produced in the north of England, Wales and Scotland. Through them, and the City, the UK had been geared to do well in a globalised world that the war helped destroy. The UK won the world wars, but its legacy was huge national debt relative to GDP and balance of payments difficulties. The UK has veered between a ‘liberal market’ (American style) and a ‘co-ordinated market’ (European) economic model, the former now ascendant. It’s a tale, says Professor Crafts, of relative economic decline that was partly avoidable.

It’s also about social progress: the emancipation of women, greater equality in public life, and social protection through the post-1945 welfare state, notes Professor Heather Laurie, Director of the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex. Yet the labour market remains unequal. Improvements in healthcare, education, housing, the quality of food and technology all improved quality of life but poverty persists. We live in more complex families where marriage and parenthood...
Britain now has a vastly impoverished natural world. A century of policies have failed to protect and support our forests, promoted industrial farming with reliance on food exports, and allowed the sprawl of cities and towns. Too many areas have developed around individual car transport, leaving us with deadly air pollution, and public transport systems have been run down and become too expensive. We’re now seeing the impact of climate change, which threatens to cut a further swathe of destruction and further unbalance already tottering ecosystems.

By 1914, Britain had the benefit of the massive investment the Victorians and Edwardians had made in the future, in the form of infrastructure: the railways, major roads, bridges, water and sewerage systems, and public buildings, a large part of the housing stock and many commercial and industrial buildings. Infrastructure investment has continued but we live still in a country that had been to a large extent literally built more than a century ago. The biggest economic challenge of 2014 is delivering on the investments that will shape the next century – having a long-term vision at a time of short-term economic difficulties.
RELIGION, THE STATE & CONTINUITY

Combatants in 1914-18 thought God was on their side. The 20th century is sometimes thought to be characterised by the abandonment of church and religious belief. But Professor Linda Woodhead, former director of the ESRC/AHRC religion and society programme at the University of Lancaster, says the picture is more complicated. Christianity has continued to play an important role in, for example, schooling, healing and healthcare, and in prisons.

Since the late 1980s there has also been a growth in new forms of religion. Religions brought by migration have grown, and new forms of spirituality, like mind-body-spirit practices and complementary healing and alternative spirituality have become established. The UK is still a religious rather than a secular society. The number of atheists remains small even if those who say they have ‘no religion’ (some of whom believe in God) are growing in number.

Churches too are a form of voluntary action, and that sphere has gone on adapting and innovating, says Professor Pete Alcock of the University of Birmingham, director of the ESRC’s Third Sector Research Centre. Volunteering and civic engagement has remained relatively stable, parallel with (and not supplanted by) the expansion of the welfare state; and data on charity registrations back to the middle of the last century shows these growing, reflecting increased activity as well as perhaps as an increased inclination to register.

MONEY: Professor Simon Burgess
Director of CMPO,
University of Bristol

In 1914, as now, there is a hyper-wealthy globally oriented elite. But then most of them inherited their money, they were the aristocracy and a few businessmen. Now, I think there would be a higher fraction of people having earned that money, albeit possibly from activities that now might not be socially popular (such as banking and finance). At the bottom of the income distribution, there are bigger differences across the century, both in the demographics of the poor, and in a much greater acceptance of one’s place in life then than now. Then there were substantially more people who had always been poor.
During the century one particular form of voluntary action – participation in political parties – rose to a peak at mid-century, then fell; but the shape of politics shows strong continuity, according to Professor Matthew Flinders, Director of the Sir Bernard Crick Centre for the Public Understanding of Politics at the University of Sheffield. “Its buildings and rituals are similar to 1914’s; the Palace of Westminster remains Hogwarts-on-Thames. Two main parties continue to control both the timetable of the House and the behaviour of the majority of politicians on the majority of decisions.”

The state has expanded along with the mechanisms of accountability and scrutiny, and means by which public, pressure groups, the media and MPs themselves can secure information and explanations. Yet levels of public trust in politics have fallen throughout the century, and the UK is not at all exceptional in being a disaffected democracy.

David Walker is contributing editor to the Public Leaders Network, former director of public reporting at the Audit Commission, and former ESRC Council member.
Social science studies all aspects of society and affects us all every day – at work, in school or college, within our communities, when exploring our identities and expressing our beliefs.

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