

The Spirit of '45 – review

Philip French

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Ken Loach's documentary is skilfully compiled from archive footage and newly recorded interviews with elderly socialists who remember the 1930s and 40s and with youngish leftwing academics of today. But rather than the provocative polemic one might have expected, it's more of an over-extended party political broadcast for a phantom old Labour party that is forever waiting in the wings. It celebrates the Labour landslide at the 1945 general election and the resolve never to return again to the miserable conditions that the working class endured in the 1930s. As I watched, there rang in my ears a distorted version of the question asked in the last two lines of WB Yeats's [The Second Coming](#): "And what rough socialist beast, its hour come round at last,/ Loaches towards a New Jerusalem to be born?"

This committed view of our history over the past 70 years suggests that Britain was united behind a socialist government determined to make root-and-branch changes to our national institutions, that it succeeded in this aim, and then (the film's big leap forward) a vindictive Margaret Thatcher suddenly appeared in 1979 to dismantle the great achievement.

In fact the government led by Clement Attlee (who before becoming PM styled himself Major CR Attlee and now bears a striking resemblance to Captain Mainwaring of *Dad's Army*) began to flounder early on, and he presided over a deeply divided nation. The 1945 elections had surprised almost everyone, and only a minority had the will to endure austerity in the cause of a social transformation. Discontent abounded (look at the messages sent out in 1949 by the three consecutive Ealing comedies, [Passport to Pimlico](#), [Whisky Galore!](#) and [Kind Hearts and Coronets](#)), and the Tory party cunningly recreated itself quite rapidly, ready to seize power from a tired Labour government in 1951 in the manner of the Sicilian aristocracy's survival in [The Leopard](#).

Labour confronted terrible difficulties (most of which go unmentioned in this oddly insular and materialistic film) and made few fundamental lasting changes. What now remains for old nostalgists like myself are the Festival Hall on the South Bank, the National Health Service (that last set of cutlery left over from the sale of the family silver), and enough disappointment and disillusion to last a lifetime. There are heartening moments in Loach's film and evocative images. But *The Spirit of '45* lacks the force and humanity of his fictional films and is a thin, misleading and sentimental account of history, and how we got from there to here.

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The Spirit of '45 – review

Peter Bradshaw

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Ken Loach's nostalgic homage to the birth of the welfare state and Beveridge spirit is salutary for our age of austerity

The events and attitudes revived in Ken Loach's documentary-homage are so exotically distant that the "the spirit of '45" might as well mean the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745. It consists of archive clips from the postwar Attlee government that brought in the welfare state, and interviews with surviving members of that generation – not the high-ups, but the doctors, nurses, trade unionists and general citizen-consumers of the new statist consensus that survived until Margaret Thatcher arrived in 1979. There is perhaps something a bit patrician-nostalgist in Ken Loach's movie, but I found myself increasingly swept along by the calm simplicity of its presentation, which makes it clear that the [NHS](#) is our last stand, the last survivor of the Beveridge spirit; it arose from the war, and this film reminds us that admiring the health service has become a distinctively patriotic virtue. There is no shortage of medical corporations licking their lips at the rich pickings it represents — a mass of privatisable loot. There are corporations who wouldn't be averse to putting ex-ministers on the directors' board a few years down the line, corporations who are naturally delighted at every anti-NHS news story. The Loach '45 spirit may be mocked – yet it seems preferable to the 21st-century spirit of austerity and paradox in which we found money to nationalise failing banks, maintaining the spirit of what Milton Friedman called socialism for the rich, free enterprise for the poor.

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