

Who was JB Priestley?

John Boynton Priestley was born in Yorkshire in 1894 and from an early age he began writing. As a member of the middle classes he had the chance to go on and study at university, but felt he would get more of a feel for the 'real' world by going out to work instead. Therefore, he became a junior clerk with a wool firm at the age of 16.



During the First World War, Priestley joined the infantry and narrowly avoided death on a number of occasions. After the war, he went to Cambridge University and earned a degree before moving to London to work as a freelance writer. Although mostly remembered for *An Inspector Calls*, Priestley wrote many, many articles, novels and plays. He was very much into his politics and this shone through in his writing.

In the 1930s Priestley became very much concerned about social inequality and this led to him setting up a new political party (The Common Wealth Party) to try and fight this. The new party wanted public ownership of land, greater levels of democracy, and a new kind of 'morality' in politics. This party eventually went on to merge with the Labour Party in 1945, but it was instrumental in helping to establish the Welfare State in the United Kingdom (which includes pensions, benefits, the NHS and more).

During the Second World War he presented a very popular weekly radio programme which the Conservative political party branded as being very left-wing. The programme was cancelled by the BBC because it was felt to be too one-sided and critical of the Government at the time.

'An Inspector Calls' was published and performed in 1945 in the Soviet Union as the Second World War came to an end. It was written at a time when class divisions were becoming blurred in Britain, when women were being given more rights and respect, and people wanted great change in society.

The play itself is set in 1912 – a time before the two World Wars, where class divisions were very clear, where women were poorly treated, where social inequality was everywhere and where there was very little support for the elderly, sick, disabled and poorest in society. It is important to remember that women were not even given the vote in Britain until 1928; before that time movements like the Suffragettes campaigned through militant action to make significant changes to society.



In 1945 Clement Attlee's Labour Party won a landslide election victory despite Winston Churchill's Conservatives leading the UK to victory in Europe in the Second World War. It was clear that the British people wanted great social change, and with the NHS being founded in 1948, the play helped to continue to change attitudes towards social inequality in the country. This is what Priestley intended with his play; he wanted the people of Britain to embrace change and make the most of the social upheaval that the two World Wars had caused.

Priestley continued to write into the 1970s, and died in 1984.