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British Prime Ministers Since 1945: Attlee

Chapter 3: Major Attlee

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In one significant respect, Clement Attlee was unique among modern prime ministers. He was new to the office, but the office was not new to him. For five years during the Second World War, from May 1940 until May 1945, Attlee served in the wartime coalition as Churchill's deputy prime minister, at first without the formal title, later with it. He lived next door to Churchill at 11 Downing Street, sat on the cabinet's Defence Committee and chaired the cabinet itself when Churchill was absent, as he frequently was. In his role as chairman of the cabinet's Lord President's Committee, Attlee acted during almost the whole of the war as, to all intents and purposes, Britain's prime minister for domestic affairs. The senior positions he held, along with the abiding confidence that Churchill had in both him and his abilities, meant that, although Attlee as leader of the Labour party led only the largest minority party in the coalition, his clout within the coalition was considerably greater than that of most of its Conservative members, including that of the chancellor of the exchequer. By 1945, the prominent figures on the Labour side who were to serve under Attlee in his postwar government – Ernest Bevin, Herbert Morrison, Hugh Dalton and Sir Stafford Cripps – had already been serving under him for several years. Their mutual relationship – including the hierarchical nature of their relationship – was firmly established. Attlee's political journey from Number 11 Downing Street to Number 10, although briefly interrupted during the summer of 1945 by Churchill's short-lived caretaker administration, was thus in every other respect as short as it could possibly have been. The incoming prime minister was someone already familiar with the territory, someone who knew his way around. A novice, he was not.

Attlee was a somewhat improbable leader of the Labour party. His background was typical of both his time and his class. At the time of his birth, in 1883, Queen Victoria was still on the throne, where she was to remain for the better part of the next twenty years. Clem's father, Henry Attlee, was a prominent City solicitor, attaining the presidency of the Law Society in 1906. His large family – ten strong, with eight children (Clem was the sixth) – lived comfortably in a large house in Putney. They had servants and were regular Anglican, not nonconformist, church-goers. There was no question of the Attlee children attending state schools. Clem's education took him from a modest fee-paying prep school, to Haileybury, which was a somewhat less modest public school, and thence to University College, Oxford, where he enjoyed himself, worked hard and, despite his subsequent disclaimers, very nearly got a First. At university he read history, then in Lincoln's Inn trained as a barrister in the chambers of a leading conveyancing counsel. At the outbreak of war in August 1914, he felt it his duty to enlist and he served in the army throughout the war, fighting at Gallipoli and in Mesopotamia and Flanders, being wounded several times. He rose to the rank of major. As an officer, as throughout his later life, Attlee, although no crude disciplinarian, took discipline, including self-discipline, seriously.

Attlee was thus no son of the labour movement, but he was a socialist. He may well have inherited a streak of radicalism from his father, who, despite being a respectable solicitor, was a left-leaning Liberal – a pro-Boer during the Boer War, for example – and made no secret of the fact. He also loved talking politics, not least at home. Even so, his son's early political views, in so far as he had any, were those of a right-wing Tory. 'Only the Tories', in Clem's view at Oxford, 'were fit to govern. They understood men, they understood power.' [Harris, 13] But that soon changed. More or less by chance, and at the instigation of one his brothers, who was

also an Old Haileyburian, Clem found himself helping out, and eventually running, a club for boys in Stepney, one of the toughest and poorest parts of East London. He quickly acquired a respect for the boys in his charge (or, at any rate, for most of them) and also came quickly to believe that they owed their poverty and lack of education, not to their own limitations but to the social system that had made them what they were – and had given them so little opportunity to be anything else. ‘I soon began to realize’, he wrote later, ‘the curse of casual labour, I got to know what slum landlords, and sweating, meant. I understood why the Poor Law was so hated.’

[Harris, 20] Attlee remained at the club for seven years and continued to live in the East End for a further seven. He was never an intellectual socialist; he never wrote intellectually demanding books in the style of Dalton or, in a later generation, Anthony Crosland, and he contributed little or nothing at any stage of his life to the development of socialist ideas. But he was, and remained, a gut socialist – in the sense of being, despite his background, a social reformer from the bottom up, never from the top down. He was always a practical man, never a theoretician or someone in thrall to theory.

He was also a staunch Labour man; and he was nothing if not a career politician. Labour was his party; politics was his vocation. In 1908 he joined the Labour party as a rank-and-file member (via the then semi-autonomous Independent Labour Party), and he remained a Labour stalwart until the end of his life in 1967. He stood unsuccessfully for the Stepney Borough Council before the First World War and for the London County Council shortly after it. He served for a year as mayor of Stepney, then in 1922 gained the Westminster seat of Limehouse, a seat he held in various incarnations until 1950, when he moved a short distance north to Walthamstow West. In Ramsay MacDonald’s 1924 minority Labour government, the party’s first-ever government, he served in the grand-sounding but humble post of under-secretary of

state for war. In that lowly post, he learned little. He learned more when elevated to the cabinet in 1930 by MacDonald, then in charge of Labour's second minority government. During what proved to be that government's last few months in office, Attlee served in his first – and effectively his last – post as administrative head of a government department, that of postmaster-general, among other things launching a successful campaign to sell more telephones. When MacDonald unexpectedly formed his so-called National government in August 1931, Attlee stuck with Labour, and at the general election that ensued only a few weeks later the voters of Limehouse stuck with him. He was tremendously lucky. Only 52 Labour MPs were returned, and only two of them – Attlee and a fellow Eastender called George Lansbury – had served in MacDonald's Labour cabinet. Almost automatically, Lansbury became party leader, Attlee his deputy. Those two rose solely because others fell.

Four years later, the former postmaster-general was, if anything, even luckier. The ineffectual Lansbury resigned the party leadership shortly before the 1935 general election (having been roundly abused by Ernest Bevin, leader of the mighty Transport and General Workers' Union, for 'taking [his] conscience round from body to body asking to be told what to do with it'), and it was left to Attlee to lead the Labour campaign. **[Bevin ref]** At the election, Labour staged a partial recovery, returning to parliament roughly three times as many MPs as in 1931. They needed to elect a new leader. Attlee wanted the job. So did Herbert Morrison, a minister under Ramsay MacDonald who had lost his seat in 1931 but was now back in parliament and leader of the London County Council. So did a man called Arthur Greenwood, who was personally popular and had served the party well but who drank too much. Attlee led Morrison by fifty-eight votes to forty-four on the first ballot. Greenwood, with thirty-three votes, finished last and dropped out. On the second ballot, Attlee bested Morrison by eighty-

eight votes to forty-eight. Attlee won because he had the support of almost all of the small band of returning Labour MPs who had seen him in action during the 1931 parliament, because he was trusted by most of the MPs sponsored by the trade unions and because Morrison was widely regarded as too right-wing and much too London-centred. Ramsay MacDonald had had star quality and had deserted the party. Labour MPs were in the market for someone less glamorous – and no one ever accused Attlee of being glamorous. He was, by a wide margin, the candidate who divided the party least. In May 1940, as Labour leader and as someone who had played a major role in ensuring that Winston Churchill rather than Lord Halifax succeeded Neville Chamberlain as prime minister, Attlee returned to government as Churchill's number two. When Labour won the 1945 general election, Morrison let it be known that he thought that he rather than Attlee should succeed the wartime leader, but almost no one agreed with him and, ignoring Morrison, Attlee accepted the king's invitation to form a government. Quite apart from his own position, he was clear that that was the constitutionally correct thing to do.

The new prime minister, given his background, was not only a somewhat improbable leader of the Labour party: personally he was also in many ways a strange mixture. He was a socialist, or at least a radical social reformer, but he was also, simultaneously, a dyed-in-the-wool traditionalist. His and his party's policies might be radical, but Attlee's views about Britain's historic institutions and its place in the wider world, as well as his personal lifestyle, were, with rare exceptions, wholly conventional. He was the very epitome of bourgeois respectability (and probably an asset to the Labour party partly for that reason). The seeming disjunction between Attlee the socialist and Attlee the traditionalist mystified some of his followers ('Attlee was the Prime Minister whom nobody knew') and alienated others, notably on Labour's left wing. **[Foot, Bevan, 26]** His traditionalism manifested itself in a whole variety of ways. Whereas in 1914

his brother Tom had registered as a conscientious objector, Clem had signed up. He quite liked being addressed between the wars as Major Attlee. He drank in moderation, thoughtfully smoked a pipe and seldom swore. His home life was impeccable – left to her own devices, his wife Violet would undoubtedly have voted Conservative (and may possibly have done so anyway) – and he invariably dressed like a bank manager or country solicitor. When Aneurin Bevan turned up at a royal banquet attired in a lounge suit instead of the customary dinner jacket, Attlee took him aside after the next cabinet meeting, roundly ticked him off for the solecism and all but ordered him not to repeat it. **[Foot, *Bevan*, 30-1 + sequel]** His devotion to the monarchy was profound. A journalist who often saw him reported that he had only once seen the Labour leader exhibit emotion in public: ‘He was cool even when he spoke of Ernest Bevin whom he loved. But when he spoke of George VI’s death, tears were in his eyes and voice.’ **[Foot, *Bevan*, 349n]** Although his government curbed the power of the House of Lords to delay legislation passed by the House of Commons, Attlee clearly had a soft spot for their lordships. On his retirement as Labour leader, he joined their ranks as Earl Attlee (no mere barony for him) and derived considerable pleasure from debating his choice of a coat of arms with heralds at the College of Arms. Shortly afterwards he, Violet and their four children drove to Windsor Castle to witness his enrolment as a knight of the garter. At lunch he sat happily between the queen and the duchess of Gloucester. **[Harris, 545 + limerick]**

For our purposes, however, the most important aspect of his traditionalism was his attitude towards the job of prime minister. His willingness to accept the job at the behest of the king, without bothering to stand for reelection as leader of the Labour party, was indicative. He had no desire to be lord of the manor, but he was not going to be anybody’s servant either. His approach to the job was conditioned by his unquestioning acceptance of the norms of cabinet

government. He alone chose its members, he alone chose their subordinate ministers, he gave all of them their individual postings, he kept a close eye on all of them, and he had no compunction about sacking those who failed to meet his exacting standards; but at the same time he did not dispute the constitutional right of the cabinet to take – in reality, not just in form – the great bulk of the most important decisions in government. This disposition towards constitutional propriety was reinforced by the fact that his cabinet included, of necessity, a group of men (they were all men) whose political standing was almost as great as his own, who were undoubtedly his equals intellectually and who, not least, had held senior ministerial posts during most of the war and had been, without exception, notable successes in those posts. If Attlee himself was not new to the ways of government, neither was any of them. Bevin had been poached from his trade union by Churchill to become minister of labour and national service. Morrison had been home secretary and minister of home security. Dalton had been minister of economic warfare and then president of the board of trade. Stafford Cripps, having served as ambassador to the Soviet Union, returned to Britain as leader of the House of Commons and later as minister of aircraft production.

These were the formidable individuals on whom Attlee relied – and on whom he had no choice but to rely. His personal likes and dislikes scarcely came into it. He loved and trusted Bevin but at the same time disliked and distrusted Morrison, suspected Dalton of being unreliable and doubted Cripps's political judgement. However, all four of them – the Big Four – had to be appointed to senior ministerial positions in 1945. Bevin became foreign secretary, Morrison, in effect, the government's domestic-affairs supremo, Dalton the chancellor of the exchequer and Cripps the president of the board of trade. Although they subsequently occupied a variety of ministerial posts, all four remained in the cabinet until the end, or until very near the

end, of Attlee's time in office. All four might on occasion be hard to live with, but they could not be dispensed with.

Everyone who has written about the Attlee administration, including those who served in it, attest to the central importance at the time of the cabinet as a collective decision-making institution. Usually they attest to it simply by taking its central importance for granted. Of course, they seem to be saying, the cabinet was crucial: that was where the key decisions were taken. Between 1945 and 1951 the cabinet typically met twice a week, sometimes more often, with discussion frequently uninhibited. A July 1947 entry in Hugh Dalton's diary is typical:

Cabinet this morning, without papers, to discuss Balance of Payments generally. Attlee opens briefly and then I speak [as chancellor of the exchequer]. Morrison has now more or less come round to my side and Cripps is on my side, though playing no leading part at all in the discussion. I emphasise the urgency of it all We have, as usual, full length orations from Shinwell and Bevan. The former is exceptionally rattled, suspicious, irrelevant and discourteous. He demands information on our gold and dollar reserves as though I had deliberately withheld it from him. He has by now antagonised all our colleagues. . . . It was agreed at this morning's Cabinet [held on a Tuesday] that I should prepare a paper with definite proposals for Friday's Cabinet. **[Dalton diaries, 400]**

From some weeks after the cabinet had agreed to nationalise the railways, one of its members pestered the prime minister with papers suggesting that the cabinet should reconsider its 'proposals'. The prime minister terminated the correspondence: 'The cabinet does not propose: it decides.' **[Harris, 404]**

As chair of the cabinet, Attlee regarded his role as that of mediator, conciliator and dispatcher of business. In his own words, 'The job of the Prime Minister is to get the general

feeling – collect the voices. And then, when everything reasonable has been said, to get on with the job and say, ‘Well, I think the decision of the Cabinet is this, that or the other. Any objections? Usually there aren’t.’ **[Williams, 81 + David Hunt, *OtS*, 39-40]** There usually weren’t, partly because Attlee was an effective conciliator and negotiator and partly because an elaborate system of cabinet committees, largely of his own devising, ensured that business usually arrived before the full cabinet in a fit state to be discussed rationally (or sometimes, as with Emanuel Shinwell, irrationally). All of the most important committees were chaired either by Attlee himself or one or another of the Big Four. Even Herbert Morrison, no Attlee admirer, conceded following his retirement that Attlee had performed well in the role he had chosen: ‘In presiding over the Cabinet, Mr. Attlee was essentially the good Chairman, giving guidance, maintaining the relevance of discussion and leading it to a generally acceptable conclusion. He was not dictatorial.’ **[Morrison, *G&P*, 50]** Attlee could certainly not abide irrelevance or nonsense. Cabinet meetings under his guidance usually took up as little time as possible, and ministers who talked too much were sometimes sacked for that reason.

In all things, Clement Attlee was nothing if not brisk. He appointed his ministers briskly and, if need be, he saw them off briskly. Sentimentality did not come into it. Aneurin Bevan during the 1930s had occupied a position on the far left of the Labour party, and during the war he had been Labour’s harshest critic of the coalition government; but Attlee recognised his abilities and included him in the cabinet as minister of health. In offering him the appointment, he was terse: ‘I made it clear that he was starting with me with a clean sheet. . . . “You are the youngest member of the Cabinet. Now it’s up to you. The more you can learn the better.”’ **[Harris, 405; Foot, *Bevan*, 25]** One newly elected member of parliament, still in the army, was summoned to Downing Street and ushered into the prime minister’s office. The prime minister

looked up. ‘Soskice?’, he asked. ‘Yes, Sir?’, the new MP responded, puzzled. ‘Solicitor-General.’ ‘Yes, Sir?’, replied Soskice, startled. ‘Any questions?’ ‘No, Sir.’ He was then shown out. And that was that. **[DS: OK?]** James Griffiths’ interview with the prime minister took just a little longer:

I was summoned to No. 10, and ushered into the Cabinet Room. . . . Then, as always, Clem wasted no words but came straight to the point, and invited me to join his Government in the post of Secretary of State for the Commonwealth. When he noticed that I hesitated to reply, he asked me if I would prefer another post. I at once replied: ‘Yes, I would like to serve as Minister of National Insurance,’ to which he answered: ‘That’s a good idea – that settles it – good day and good luck.’ **[Griffiths, 77 + x in cabinet ☺]**

Attlee could also be to the point, and usually was, at the other end of the process. There is a story, often told, of the junior minister who was invited to Downing Street expecting, at best, promotion or, at the very least, to be congratulated on what a good job he was doing. ‘What can I do for you, prime minister?’, the cheerful minister asked. ‘I want your job’, said Attlee. The unfortunate man was taken aback. ‘But . . . why, prime minister?’, he asked. ‘Afraid you’re not up to it’ came the terse reply. **[Harris version, 407]**

However, once he had appointed them, Attlee made no attempt to micromanage his ministers and largely left them to get on with it. Bevin *was* the foreign secretary. Dalton and then Cripps *were* successive chancellors of the exchequer. The creation of the National Health Service was left almost entirely in Aneurin Bevan’s hands. Nevertheless, Attlee reserved to himself, as Walter Bagehot might have put it, ‘the right to be consulted, the right to encourage, the right to warn.’ **[WB, EC, ??]** He also reserved to himself the rights to criticise, cajole and

ask tough questions – as well as, ultimately, the right to sack. Although shorter than the average, these notes to ministers exemplify his style:

Secretary of State for Air, 7 January 1946

When travelling on the Staines-Basingstoke road this weekend, I found that the main road running through the Hartford Bridge Flats aerodrome is closed at 5pm, making a detour of 4 miles. I understand that there is little, if any, night flying at this aerodrome. . . . Please let me know why it is necessary to continue this nuisance.

Secretary of State for India, 18 January 1946

I do not think you can usefully draft a telegram to the Viceroy until after the Cabinet meeting. Your present draft is much too vague as to the function of the Committee of Ministers.

Secretary of State for War, 19 June 1946

Refer my conversation with you on delays in the War Office. Please explain why it took a week for you to answer my M206/46. The contents of your reply seem to have required no research.

Minister of Transport, Minister of Town and Country Planning, 19 April 1947

When your Bills come to the House of Lords you should be careful before agreeing to any amendments of substance to consider the effect of such a concession on the Party in the House and, where this might be likely to cause trouble, you should seek authority before accepting them.

Lord Privy Seal, 26 November 1947

Thank you for your Minute about bacon. I have asked the Minister of Food to let me have a note on the question you raise.

President of the Board of Trade, 10 December 1947

I was very glad to read your telegram to the Chancellor. Well done!

Minister of Supply, 8 March 1949

I am surprised that a Press announcement about the production of plutonium at Harwell was made on 7 March without previous consultation with me, and I should be glad if you would tell me how this came about.

Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 20 October 1949

I have read C.P. (49) 207. I agree with the analysis except that I rate the chances of the continuance of French rule in Indo-China very low. I think that France has missed the bus.

[Harris, 598-602]

Attlee's interests were across the board. As must be evident, they included the humblest of domestic matters as well as foreign affairs and defence.

By nature, Attlee was an office worker, in the literal sense that he worked mainly in his office or in the cabinet room. He chaired the cabinet and cabinet committees and, when necessary, conferred face to face with individual ministers and groups of ministers; but he did not enjoy talking for its own sake and much preferred written to oral communication. He read his official papers voraciously and quickly, and he responded quickly and incisively to everything he read. He took as much time as he needed to make intelligent, well-informed decisions, but not a moment longer than that. According to one of his biographers, 'ministers and their heads of departments soon realized that the quickest way to get action was to send the Prime Minister a paper, rather than wait until they had the opportunity to discuss the matter with him.' **[Harris, 404]** A civil servant who worked under Attlee and later under several of his successors remarked that Attlee was 'orderly, regular, efficient and methodical to a degree that put him in a different class from any of the prime ministers who followed him'. **[ibid]** Another believed that Britain 'was never so well governed, in this technical sense, in living memory as it

was under Attlee'. [Harris, 405] In other words, he conformed perfectly to civil servants' conception of the ideal prime minister.

On the whole, Attlee was a reactive rather than a proactive prime minister. He regarded it as his job to make sure that the main commitments contained in Labour's 1945 election manifesto were enacted into law and to try to prevent anything being done that would reduce Labour's chances of winning the next election. His broad objective was to reduce the poverty, destitution and hopelessness that he had seen in the East End of London and during the Great Depression and to play his part in helping to create in Britain a fairer, more equal society. Not a man for *grands projets* himself, he almost never reached out to take charge of projects, whether grand or otherwise, that would normally be in the hands of others. He seldom took personal initiatives.

To this general rule, there were three exceptions. One was Attlee's decision that Britain should build its own atomic bomb, a decision that was kept secret from, and certainly not authorised by, either the cabinet or parliament. Another, once he had concluded that the Colonial Office was incompetent and ill-informed, was to take personal charge of British policy towards India. The third – effectively forced upon him in 1950 by Bevin's ill health – was to fly himself to Washington to obtain assurances from President Truman that the United States would not extend the Korean War into China, despite the latter's military intervention in Korea, and would never – except in the event of an extreme emergency – use its atomic weapons without consulting its British and Canadian allies. He obtained the assurances he wanted. These were important exceptions, but they were exceptions. [add endnotes on each, add + 1951]

To a degree unusual in a top-flight politician, Attlee was a private person and a loner. Although no orator in the Churchill mode, he could and did speak effectively on the stump and in

the House of Commons, and he was not averse to chatting casually with constituents and parliamentary colleagues. On the eve of his 1950 flight to Washington, he sat down for dinner in the House of Commons at the same table as several ministers who were not in the cabinet and kicked off the conversation by asking ‘Who is the best modern popular historian?’ – a question that led to a general conversation about the writing of history. [Harris, 462] But Attlee was never someone to put himself about. No one ever described him as gregarious. Moreover, unlike many of his successors, he was not surrounded by courtiers; he had no coterie. He was close to his two parliamentary private secretaries, Arthur Jenkins (father of Roy) and Arthur Moyle, and insisted that his post-retirement coat of arms hint at their shared Welshness; and at one stage he allowed himself the luxury of a public-relations adviser, Francis Williams. But when at work in the office his companions were almost exclusively civil servants. [Jay] If he wanted to relax, he did so in the company of his wife Vi and other members of his family. His relaxation reading included Wisden’s Cricketers’ Almanack and Gibbons’ *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* – of which he claimed to have reread all seven volumes while prime minister – as well as works of popular history. He worked till late. He was not someone who, of an evening, liked to put his feet up and enjoy gossiping and drinking with intimates.

As prime minister, Attlee’s attitude towards the House of Commons and towards the parliamentary Labour party, the PLP, were what might have been expected of someone first elected to parliament in 1922 and where he had been ever since.. He took both the House of Commons and the PLP seriously. He simply assumed it was part of his job to be physically present whenever possible and to listen to what was being said. The House of Commons was not a stage on which he occasionally performed; it was, along with his constituency, where he had his political being. He answered prime minister’s questions (which were then a less theatrical

event than they have since become), he spoke frequently in the House, he spent hours in the tea-room, and, like most of his prewar predecessors, he often spent time in the chamber simply listening to debates, sensing the mood of the House and sizing up individual MPs – opposition members as well as his own ministers and backbench Labour MPs. If a new MP spoke, he would sometimes consult a published guide to the House to find out who they were.

As a matter of routine, he attended meetings of the parliamentary Labour party and attended to what was said there, and he frequently intervened in PLP discussions and debates. Because the great majority of the MPs elected in 1945 were, as he was, on the reformist rather than the radical wing of the party, he could normally, almost invariably, count on majority support. However, if the government showed signs, as it occasionally did, of renegeing on the promises set out in Labour's 1945 manifesto, and if as a result even the most loyal backbenchers showed signs of growing restive, Attlee – nothing of not a staunch Labour man – was capable of siding with the backbenchers against one of his own colleagues. That manifesto committed Labour to nationalising the steel industry, but Herbert Morrison believed steel nationalisation would alienate floating voters and instead came up with a compromise plan that would leave the industry, although under government supervision, still in private hands. On this occasion, it became clear at a PLP meeting that a large proportion, probably a majority, of all Labour MPs, were keen that full-scale nationalisation should go ahead, and, although he harboured doubts of his own about the wisdom of that move, Attlee chose to side with them against Morrison – not openly at a PLP meeting, but by refusing to back Morrison in cabinet. Nationalisation remained on the government's agenda. As Attlee's most thorough and thoughtful biographer, Kenneth Harris, puts it:

This is another example of Attlee's conception of the party leadership. If the compromise plan for steel, after being clearly outlined to the party, was not acceptable to it, that was that. If Morrison did not accept that party feelings – and those of the Cabinet – were strongly opposed to his plan, he, Attlee, did. In his philosophy, party leaders were obligated to try and carry out what the party was committed to . . . [Harris, 323]

For Attlee, 'the party' meant Labour MPs. He never had to worry about the party in the country. The overwhelming majority of trade-union leaders and rank-and-file members of constituency parties were solidly behind him.

Attlee's relations with what later generations would come to call 'the media' were virtually non-existent. To him, newspapers, the radio and latterly television were scarcely visible or audible, like the quacking of ducks flying across a distant field. He simply was not interested in them. He did no more than glance at the *The Times* and the *Daily Herald*, the former mostly for its crossword puzzle and its notices of births, marriages and deaths, the latter because it functioned, in effect, as Labour's in-house newsletter. He seldom, if ever, spoke to journalists off the record, he appears never to have given a press conference, and he certainly never deigned to appear dramatically from behind a curtain to utter banalities while standing at a lectern alongside a visiting foreign dignitary. Press photographers could take photographs, but there were no photo-opportunities. It was with difficulty that Francis Williams persuaded him to install a wire-service teleprinter adjacent to the Number 10 cabinet room so that he could – if he chose to – keep abreast of what was happening in the outside world. [Margach, *AofP*, 90-1, **add detail**]. His very first words to Williams, on appointing him, were 'As you know, Francis, I am allergic to the press.' [FW, *NsS*, 215] Simple shyness played a part in his reluctance to talk to journalists. 'He [also] took the old-fashioned view that politicians and journalists were likely

to do their best work if they were not in each other's pockets.' [ibid] Asked by a *Daily Herald* interviewer after the 1951 election why he had devoted so little time to foreign affairs in his speeches during the campaign, he replied: 'I knew that that those issues were in people's minds. But I did not feel that, as Prime Minister, I should discuss extempore, at hurried meetings, a subject like the Persia dispute when it was being considered by the Security Council.' [Harris, 492] His personal motto was clearly akin to the Second World War catchline 'Careless talk costs lives'.

His radio and television personalities were equally reticent. He appeared on air as seldom as he could, and, when he did appear, he uttered as few words as he thought he could get away with – and sometimes the number of those words was very small. One interview, frequently quoted, was extreme but not untypical. It took place on the eve of the 1951 election campaign:

Interviewer: Tell us something of how you view the election prospects.

Attlee: Oh well, we shall go in with a good fight. Very good. Very good chance of winning if we go in competently. We always do.

Interviewer: On what will Labour take its stand?

Attlee: Well, that is what we shall be announcing shortly.

Interviewer: What are your immediate plans Mr Attlee?

Attlee: My immediate plans are to go down to a committee to decide on just that thing as soon as I can get away from here.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you'd like to say about the coming election?

Attlee: No. [Hennessy, 170]

The only thing unusual about that interview is that most of Attlee's answers were longer than the questions he was asked. Commonly on those occasions, paragraph-long questions would be followed by single-sentence or single-word responses. [e.g. **Harris, Attlee, 523-4**] On television, then in its infancy, Attlee always looked as uncomfortable as he evidently felt.

During most of his time in Downing Street, Attlee had the good luck to be totally secure in his job. He knew that he was, and most of the time everyone else knew it too. As a result, he normally had no need to spend time and energy defending his position, whether by placating potential rivals or bowing to pressure from the backbenches. He could simply carry on as he always had. However, his position did come under threat during the summer of 1947 – and the circumstances surrounding that threat are worth describing in a little detail.

The whole of 1947 tested Attlee's government almost beyond endurance; Dalton in his memoirs christened it the *Annus Horrendus* (compared with the previous year's *Annus Mirabilis*). [Dalton, 187 + KOM, Chap. 8, esp. 331] A harsh winter at the beginning of the year combined with ministers' failure to manage the nation's fuel stocks led to falling production, rising unemployment and millions of people shivering with cold in their homes. The volume of Britain's exports fell while the cost of imports, especially from the United States, inexorably rose. Britain's balance-of-payments deficit teetered towards the brink of disaster, accompanied by the rapid depletion of the huge sums provided by the US government to Britain soon after the end of the war in the form of a repayable loan. One condition of that loan, a condition imposed by the US, was that sterling should become freely convertible as an international currency by the summer of 1947; but convertibility, when it came, triggered massive capital outflows from the UK, a vertiginous slump in share prices and the not-so-distant prospect of Britain's defaulting on the American loan. 'With all these hammer-blows raining down, Britain seemed to be going

bankrupt, and fast.’ [KOM, 345] Convertibility was soon suspended, with US acquiescence; but the balance-of-trade deficit, by now compounded by a yawning budget deficit, necessitated tax rises and drastic cuts in government spending. Even worse for ordinary Britons, the need to prop up sterling and to continue to repay the American loan necessitated drastic cuts in the volume of UK imports, including of foodstuffs. Individuals’ and households’ food rations, already meagre by prewar standards, were still further reduced. By the end of 1947, the age of austerity commonly associated with the postwar Labour government had truly begun.

Hardly surprisingly under the circumstances, many in Labour’s ranks grew restive. This was a time of national crisis – with more than a whiff of 1940 about it – but the man at the top was no Churchill. Attlee’s air of quiet competence, which normally stood him in such good stead, especially among his own colleagues and parliamentary supporters, now struck a large proportion of them as a liability. They looked for a lead, but Attlee was no leader and made no claim to be one. Moreover, at a moment when high rhetoric appeared to be essential, the prime minister was someone who disdained rhetoric and was anyway incapable of it. He was a veritable charisma-free zone. He was also someone whose grasp of quotidian detail was immense but who had little understanding – and never claimed to have any – of broad-gauged financial and economic issues. In 1940, Churchill had an easily identifiable, if powerful, enemy: Nazi Germany. Britain’s economic problems in 1947 were infinitely more complex and multifarious. Attlee as prime seemed to be – because he undoubtedly was – adrift.

Meetings of the parliamentary Labour party gradually became testier, and it was in July 1947 – against the background of the government’s floundering attempts to deal with the economic crisis – that the backbench revolt over Morrison’s proposal to abandon Labour’s manifesto pledge on steel nationalisation erupted. One of Nye Bevan’s biographers maintains –

and he is probably right – that ‘Attlee’s grip on the Party just at that moment seemed more feeble than at any other period in his twenty-two-year tenure of the leadership.’ He adds that during this period Clem seemed unusually ‘petulant and peremptory’. [Foot, *Bevan*, 224] During July, there was even talk among backbench MPs of ousting Attlee as party leader and replacing him with someone else, probably Bevin; but, with the coming of the summer parliamentary recess, the talk was never translated into action. ‘It is one of the every-recurrent parliamentary miracles’, Dalton noted laconically later, ‘how great waves of opinion make no final impact, but disperse themselves in broken spray.’ [*HTandA*, 240]

That particular wave of opinion was never all that great, but two months later, with the economic situation still showing no signs of improvement, the talk became altogether more serious, certainly among three of the cabinet’s Big Four ministers. Cripps, dismayed by the government’s failure to deal adequately with the economic crisis and also dismayed by Attlee’s failure, as he saw it, to provide strong leadership, set about trying to initiate a putsch – a sort of bizarre cabinet reshuffle from below. He went to see Dalton, proposing that Bevin be installed as prime minister. Dalton would go to the Foreign Office. Morrison would remain deputy prime minister, but in name only. Cripps, at Bevin’s side, would take over most of Morrison’s responsibilities, notably those related to economic planning. Attlee would remain in the cabinet, moving next door to Number 11 as chancellor (though it was not clear, with Cripps in place, what would be left of the chancellor’s hitherto crucial job).

This elaborate plot was doomed from the start – that is, unless Attlee himself was prepared to fall on his sword. Cripps was keen on ousting Attlee, obviously. So, too, was Dalton – but in his case only on condition that Morrison was willing to act in concert with Cripps and himself. But Morrison, the potential third of the triumvirate, refused to join the conspiracy. He despised

and envied Attlee, and he did want him out; but, when Dalton sounded him out, Morrison made it clear that he thought that it was he who should succeed Attlee, not Bevin (whom he distrusted and whom, according to Dalton, he regarded as ‘a strange mixture of genius and stupidity’). [***HTanda***, **242**] Cripps, having thus been abandoned by both Dalton or Morrison, went on his own to see Attlee, hoping to persuade him voluntarily to step down. He failed in that endeavour – Attlee had no intention of stepping down – but at the same time Cripps got most of what he wanted. To his surprise, Attlee offered him – and he accepted – effective control over the most important part of Morrison’s empire: control over economic planning. It now only remained for Attlee to assuage Morrison’s hurt feelings, which he did by allowing him to retain his titles as deputy prime minister and lord president of the council. Strangely, Bevin, who was supposed to be the principal beneficiary of all this conspiring, had never been consulted about it. He showed no desire to leave the Foreign Office and in any case had no intention of betraying Attlee, of whom he was extremely fond. ‘I love the little man’, he was heard to say. [***Harris, Attlee***, **350**]

The three plotters, in short, had behaved in ways that ensured their plot would fail. They could not agree on who should succeed the fallen Caesar. They failed to take on board the fact that Bevin, the man whom two of the three of them, but not the third, regarded as Caesar’s natural successor, was almost certain to refuse to be cast in that role. They also failed to realise that the Caesar in question, Attlee, would fight back and could, with weapons in his hand. Not least, none of the three – let alone all three – was prepared to threaten to resign if Attlee refused to be budged. Their daggers were never unsheathed. Attlee thus comprehensively outmanoeuvred his would-be assassins. He had not really had to fight them off: they were far too disorganised and feeble. He was never threatened again.

Apart from those few weeks in 1947, Attlee did not have to worry about fending off attacks on his position. During most of his time, he also enjoyed an additional advantage, one by no means accorded all of his successors. It was generally assumed that Labour under his leadership could – and probably would – win the next election. Although there were a number of large swings against the party in the by-elections held in Labour-held seats between 1945 and 1950, Labour actually lost only one seat (and that in rather peculiar circumstances). **[expand in endnote, explain deviant case]** In those days, by-election results were generally assumed to be an accurate barometer of the political weather, and Labour's by-elections record boded well. The same could be said for the findings of opinion polls, though in those days few politicians paid as much attention to them as they do now. The Conservatives were often ahead of Labour in the regular Gallup polls but seldom – except at the very end of 1947 – by more than a few percentage points. **[AK, BPO, 2-3]** Gallup's results could anyway be written off as only what was to be expected in the mid term of a parliament. As late as a few weeks before the 1950 general election, Dalton was writing in his diary, 'I am inclined to expect us to come back with a smaller, but still workable majority.' **[Dalton diaries 464]** Others were more pessimistic; but the pessimism in no way affected Attlee's position. He was a seasoned election campaigner, and no one seems seriously to have believed that there was an alternative leader on hand who could lead the party to victory when Attlee could not.

Labour was returned with a majority, but it was not a workable one. Attlee carried on as prime minister much as he had before, but he was tired and dogged by a recurring duodenal ulcer. Moreover, the political situation and, with it, Attlee's situation as prime minister had been utterly transformed. Labour's tiny majority, which the Conservatives were naturally determined to exploit in opposition, put an immense strain on ministers and backbenchers alike. Cripps, who

had long been ill, stood down as chancellor within several months of the election. Bevin was no longer strong enough to carry on as foreign secretary and died in the spring of 1951. His successor as foreign secretary, Morrison, soon proved ill suited to the office. And, although Dalton remained in the government, his influence and political standing never recovered from the dire events of 1947 culminating in his forced resignation as chancellor. The Big Four – already before the election a shadow of its former self – now no longer existed. Attlee no longer had near him a quartet of ministers who, whatever their differences of personality and outlook, had in common outstanding ability and long and varied experience.

The outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 and the government's adoption, under American pressure, of a massive rearmament programme set back the country's economic recovery, which had only just begun. It also undermined the unity of the Labour party. Ministers agreed that Britain should join in the United Nations' military resistance to North Korea's aggression in Korea, but a minority, led by Aneurin Bevan, maintained that Britain's rearmament programme, certainly on the scale adopted by the government, was unaffordable, unsustainable and in conflict with the pursuit of Labour's domestic policy objectives. Attlee, who had hitherto bridged the gap between the right and the left of the party, refusing to back either side, now had no alternative but to choose. The gap was no longer bridgeable, by him or anyone else. In any case, attempts at bridge building, whoever made them, were almost certain to be thwarted by the political differences and the intense personal rivalry between Bevan and Hugh Gaitskell, Cripps's successor as chancellor. Attlee and the majority of the cabinet backed Gaitskell, and in April 1951 Bevan resigned along with two other ministers, one of them Harold Wilson. The Labour party, weary, divided and no longer sure of its way, lost the 1951 election – though only just. Attlee was no longer prime minister (though he remained leader of the Labour party and an MP until 1955).

A proper assessment of Clement Attlee's professional performance as prime minister will have to wait until a later chapter; but in the meantime it is worth drawing attention to the huge role that luck played during most of Attlee's political career. As we have seen, he was lucky to be one of the few Labour MPs to survive the 1931 massacre and lucky again to be elected Labour leader four years later because he was deputy leader already and Herbert Morrison had been out of the House. As Labour would almost certainly have lost the 1940 general election (the one that never happened), luck in the form of the outbreak of the Second World War and Churchill's ascent to power enabled him to become deputy prime minister and to develop a countrywide reputation as a patriot and a safe pair of hands. He was lucky that, when Labour came to power in 1945, it brought with it a well-developed programme of action, embodied in its election manifesto *Let Us Face the Future*, a programme that both the radical and the moderate wings of the party – from Nye Bevan on the left to Herbert Morrison on the right – were well content to accept. He was lucky, too, that between 1945 and 1950 he could rely on the support and cooperation of a cadre of first-class, experienced ministers, as a result of which he did not have to function as his own one-man cabinet. During those years, his luck held when it became clear that, although Cripps, Dalton and Morrison, might on occasion conspire against him, Ernest Bevin had no such inclination. Sadly, Attlee's luck – his *fortuna*, as Machiavelli might have put it – deserted him in 1950-51. His final months in office were as ragged and unhappy as his first had been propitious.