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British Prime Ministers Since 1945: Churchill

Chapter 4: Winston the Stubborn

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For three and a half years, between October 1951, when Clement Attlee departed the scene, and April 1955, when Sir Anthony Eden arrived on it, 10 Downing Street was frequently uninhabited. Britain did have a prime minister in name – someone with a very famous name, Winston Churchill – but for much of the time it did not have one in reality. During those three and a half years, the job at the top was often scarcely being done. Or, more precisely, most of it *was* being done, but by other ministers and officials, not by the prime minister. The government largely ran itself. The old warlord, by now in his late 70s, had neither the strength nor the will to play the role of peacelord. Clement Attlee, for all his limitations, was continuously on the job. The Winston Churchill of the early 1950s most certainly was not. One of his many biographers describes him as having at this time been ‘gloriously unfit for office.’ (**RJ, 845**)

In temperament, character and lifestyle, Churchill and Attlee could not have been more different. Attlee’s was an equable temperament; Churchill, by contrast, was moody and sometimes depressed (afflicted by what he himself called his ‘Black Dog’). [**Storr, ‘The Man, esp. 207**] Attlee was a deeply private man; Churchill was a showman, ever eager to draw attention to himself. Attlee practised self-restraint, Churchill self-expression. Attlee was the epitome of understatement; but Churchill could go over the top and frequently did (sometimes splendidly, as in his memorable wartime speeches, sometimes foolishly, as when, during the 1945 election campaign, in a party-political broadcast he charged that, if a Labour government were elected and sought to carry out a socialist programme, it ‘would have to fall back on some form of Gestapo’). [**MG, Vol. VIII, 32**] Attlee in his personal life was prudence personified

while Churchill always spent lavishly if not always wisely. Attlee was famously abstemious, anything but a sybarite, whereas Churchill, with his cigars and love of champagne (buckets-full of it), believed passionately in living life to the full and made absolutely sure that he did. Attlee was a homebody; Churchill loved travel and foreign parts. Whereas Attlee was extraordinarily self-sufficient, dependent only on the love of his wife and immediate family, Churchill desperately needed the support of his wife Clementine, to be sure, but also the support and comradeship of a close circle of friends, men (they were all men) from whom he could accept criticism but on whose complete loyalty he could invariably rely. There was always something faintly child-like about Churchill. Attlee gave the impression of having been born grown up.

There was a further difference between the two men, one of immediate political significance, especially following Churchill's return to office in 1951. Clement Attlee had been widely admired and respected, but no one ever thought of him as being someone very special. He was never a national icon, someone venerated and held in awe. But Churchill was. A figure of controversy before the Second World War and then already regarded widely as being well past it, by the end of the war he had come, in his person, to symbolise Britain's wartime fortitude, its endurance and its ultimate victory. Of course, he had his critics, enemies and detractors – prominent among them Aneurin Bevan – but millions of ordinary Britons distinguished sharply between him and his party. While having every intention of voting Labour, they could turn out in their thousands to see and cheer him. During most of his premiership, his ministerial colleagues believed that, whatever else might be true, he was, on balance, an electoral asset to the Tory party. Even they, who could personally attest to his failings, were in awe of him and reluctant to anger him or cause him undue distress. 'Really', Harold Macmillan reflected in his diary, 'he is a unique, dear man with all his qualities and faults

...? [M, *Diaries 1950-1957*, 385] As for the rank and file of the Conservative party, they all but worshipped this great, dear man. Whatever went on in the upper reaches of Churchill's government, there would be no carping in that quarter.

Forming his cabinet in 1945, Clement Attlee was able to draw on – in reality he had no alternative but to draw on – the services of men whose great abilities were matched by their recent and extraordinarily intense experience of government. Churchill in 1951 was less lucky than Attlee and also less wise. Several of the Conservatives who had served in the higher ranks of Churchill's wartime coalition had departed the scene. Only two Conservative members of his small war cabinet, Anthony Eden and Oliver Lyttelton, still sat in the House of Commons. His new chancellor, R.A. ('Rab') Butler, had played a large part in reorienting Conservative party policy while in opposition in the aftermath of the 1945 debacle, but he had been only a middle-ranking minister during the war and had never previously served in an economic post. His new home secretary, Sir David Maxwell Fyfe, similarly had played only minor roles during the war, although he had distinguished himself as a prosecutor at the postwar Nuremberg Trial and had helped draft the European Convention on Human Rights. Apart from Eden and Lyttelton, only Lord Woolton, among the members of the new cabinet, had played a prominent part – as minister of food supply – in the wartime coalition. Woolton remained a member of the cabinet throughout Churchill's second term in office, though never as a departmental minister. In short, Churchill's postwar government lacked any functional equivalent of the Attlee government's Big Four.

Attlee made only one serious mistake in his choice of senior ministers: appointing Herbert Morrison to the Foreign Office in 1951. Churchill made several. Feeling most comfortable in the company of his wartime comrades in arms, the peacetime Churchill appointed

to his administration, early in his premiership, Lord Cherwell (Frederick Lindemann), his long-serving but prejudiced and arrogant scientific adviser (who believed, among other things, that Great Britain could dominate the United States of America in a future ‘union of the English Speaking World’), [Colville, *FofP*, 651, also 736], General Lord (‘Pug’) Ismay, his wartime military chief of staff, who accepted office only reluctantly and departed after only five months, and Field Marshall Viscount Alexander of Tunis, who accepted the post of defence minister equally reluctantly, was thoroughly miscast and miserable as a politician and could not have been more delighted when Churchill, after little more than two years, let him go in favour of Harold Macmillan. [cite Colville, 730: ‘inadequate and far from happy’] Churchill in general evidently found it hard to let go of the war. He also erred in trying to replicate in peacetime his wartime institution of ‘overlords’, high-ranking ministers – all of them, literally, lords – who were supposed to supervise and coordinate the activities of groups of government departments. Lords Leathers, Salisbury and Woolton were duly appointed, and Woolton stayed the course, functioning principally (and successfully) as Conservative party chairman. But the experiment as a whole was not a success and soon died a death.

In the event, these few maladroit appointments and tinkering had little effect, adverse or otherwise, on the day-to-day, month-to-month conduct of Churchill’s postwar government. The early 1950s were good years. Wartime restrictions, including rationing, could gradually be lifted. There was little unemployment. Inflation was low. Industrial unrest was virtually non-existent. The Conservatives’ manifesto for the 1951 general election deliberately promised little. It certainly did not promise either to scale back the radical expansion of the welfare state undertaken by Labour or drastically to reduce the size of the public sector. The Conservatives promised and essentially delivered what Churchill himself in October 1951 – in his first speech

to the newly elected House of Commons – called ‘several years of quiet steady administration’.

[RJ, 852 – often quoted] The overall level of competence among ministers was high, most of them having gained ministerial experience before or during the war. No one doubted Eden’s qualifications as foreign secretary, and Butler proved a skilful chancellor. Macmillan, a rising star, honoured the Tories’ pledge to build 300,000 houses a year. Moreover, although the cabinet included among its members three potential rivals for the post-Churchill premiership, in reality it included no actual rivals. The great man had long ago anointed Anthony Eden as his heir and successor, and Butler and Macmillan took it for granted that their turn, if it ever came, would have to come later. Partly because the venerated Churchill was still on the scene, partly because the government’s ambitions were not nearly as great as Labour’s had been under Attlee and partly because the latent tensions in the Conservative ranks that were later to emerge had not yet surfaced, the 1951-55 government conducted its business in a relatively relaxed fashion. The atmosphere was, not invariably but on the whole, collegial and consensual.

Churchill himself, like Attlee, took very seriously both parliament and the cabinet as a collective body. For nearly half a century, Churchill had been a brilliant, if not always listened-to, debater, orator and point-scorer in the House of Commons, and it never occurred to him to stop now. In any case, he believed it to be his bounden duty to explain and defend his government’s policies before the tribunal of his fellow parliamentarians. He loved the vigorous, sometimes heated exchanges that took place across the floor of the House. He also loved the sound of his own voice, and of course the House of Commons was where it could best be heard. He spent little time actually relaxing in the House or listening to debates simply in order to sense the mood among MPs, and he seldom chose to dine in the House, where the food was notoriously poor. But he spoke at least as often as Attlee had, and he almost invariably took

great care over the preparation of his set-piece Commons speeches as well as his speeches in America and to the annual Conservative party conference. Although perfectly capable of writing out his speeches in longhand, he preferred to dictate them in short bursts to relays of secretaries, who then presented him with typed versions so that he could assess, on paper, the quality of what he had said aloud. He devoted fully twenty hours to preparing his last major speech in the House of Commons, introducing the 1955 defence white paper. According to one of his secretaries, ‘He dictated it all himself.’ **[MG, 1097]**

As for cabinet government, it was an essential component of Churchill’s political DNA. The old warrior had been attending cabinet meetings on and off ever since 1908. In Churchill’s view, as well as in Attlee’s, the men – and the occasional woman – sitting around the cabinet table were the people in government responsible for taking, collectively, the most important decisions. Churchill could persuade and sometimes outmanoeuvre the majority of the cabinet, but he could never, if ever, command it – and he seldom tried to. Loving a good argument, he almost always respected good arguments. Discussion around his cabinet table was uninhibited, with anyone who had anything to say allowed to join in. He could pull rank – ‘After all, gentleman, I *am* Prime Minister’, he once remarked in cabinet – but he was never overbearing or domineering. **[MG, Vol. VIII, 713 quoting Alexander]** So fond was he of the cabinet as an institution that he boasted to his doctor, Lord Moran, that his cabinet met even more often than Attlee’s:

We had a hundred and ten Cabinet meetings in the past year [i.e., more than two a week], while the Socialists had only eight-five in a year – and that in a time of great political activity. I am a great believer in bringing things before the Cabinet. If a Minister has got

anything on his mind and he has the sense to get it argued by the Cabinet he will always have the machine behind him. [Moran, 28 iv '53, 404 + AS, C'IS, 85]

When Churchill had strong views on a matter, he usually got his way in cabinet, but by no means always. The final volume of Martin Gilbert's mammoth chronicle of Churchill's life is replete with accounts of occasions on which cabinet ministers, usually in the nicest possible way, rebuffed the great man. At its very first meeting, within days of the Conservatives' victory in the 1951 general election, the new cabinet rejected the prime minister's notion that the steel industry, which had been nationalised under Labour, should be denationalised by means of 'a short, simple Bill'. Colleagues objected, successfully, that the enterprise 'was likely to involve complex questions which would take some time to resolve.' [MG, 657] Also at that meeting, Eden as foreign secretary persuaded the cabinet to reject Churchill's proposal that Britain should do everything in its power – including, if necessary, the use of force – to ensure the right of all ships, whatever their destination, including ports in the state of Israel, to pass unimpeded through the Suez Canal. Eden on the contrary maintained that any 'precipitate action' on the part of Britain 'would be likely to arouse resentment', if not in Egypt, then 'in some of the other Arab States'. [MG, 658-9] Eden's view prevailed. He won. Churchill lost.

And Churchill and his colleagues – they really were colleagues rather than mere subordinates – clearly meant to carry on as they had begun. A few months later, the prime minister advised colleagues that they should reject a Ministry of Defence proposal to sell arms to both India and Pakistan, warning 'that these two countries might use the arms supplied to them for war against one another.' But Lord Ismay, still in the cabinet, persuaded his colleagues that supplying arms in limited quantities would prevent India and Pakistan from turning to the United States and, in any case, that a war between India and Pakistan was 'most unlikely'. [MG, 712 +

when?] The cabinet then, on the same day, went on to reject two more of Churchill's suggestions, both relating to weapons procurement. **[MG, 712-3]** Later in the same month, the cabinet rejected Churchill's suggestion that all the blame for a recent rise in bus and railway fares in the London area should be pinned on the Labour government's nationalisation policy. It was pointed out to him that the fare rises had nothing whatsoever to do with nationalisation but were the work of an independent tribunal, one that exercised quasi-judicial powers. Powers along those lines had been independently exercised for decades, since the passage of the Railways Act 1921. **[MG, 715]**

And so it continued. Churchill might have been rebuffed by the cabinet even more often than he was if he had taken a greater interest in purely domestic affairs – matters such as education, housing, pensions or industrial production. Being Churchill, he could, of course, hold forth on such matters, and occasionally he did, but he had not really concerned himself with domestic policy issues since the 1920s. As he had during the war, but with less excuse, during his second premiership he concerned himself almost exclusively with Britain's relations with the outside world. He was by now old and tired – frequently very tired – and lacked either the inclination or the energy to immerse himself in the details of domestic policy. He also lacked any feel for purely domestic issues, let alone any accumulated knowledge of them. As a result, he seldom took personal initiatives on such issues; and, when he worked through the papers in his red boxes late at night, he typically did no more than glance at those dealing with domestic matters. Nothing like Attlee's pithy notes to the education minister or the home secretary issued from Churchill's postwar pen. He was a home-affairs minimalist, all but a nonentity where home affairs were concerned.

One of the many issues in which Churchill was scarcely involved – indeed was overborne to the limited extent that he was involved – now seems quaint but had lasting consequences: the introduction into Britain of commercial television. Churchill was no unqualified admirer of the BBC. ‘For eleven years’, he once complained to Lord Moran, ‘they kept me off the air. They prevented me from expressing views which turned out to be right. Their behaviour has been tyrannical.’ [Moran, 3vi’52, 390] But at the same time he was old-fashioned enough to be out of sympathy with attacks on establishment organisations such as the BBC and he suspected that, with the coming of commercial television, would also come American-style vulgarity and showmanship: ‘Why’, he asked, ‘do we need this peep-show?’ [Briggs, 390] He undoubtedly disliked the monopoly of broadcasting enjoyed by the BBC, but he also believed, for some reason, that introducing commercial television would harm the Tory party’s electoral prospects. Years later he remarked to Moran: ‘It was mad of the Tories to bring in commercial television. No wonder the country is going soft.’ [Moran, 18ii’56, 690-1] Left to his own devices, Churchill would almost certainly have vetoed bringing in commercial television; but, characteristically, at least during his postwar premiership, he left others to their devices, and his cabinet, although sharply divided on the issue, succumbed to backbench pressure – especially from among the 1951 intake of younger, more iconoclastic Conservative MPs – and agreed to introduce the legislation required to introduce commercial television. The central point is that, as with so many domestic issues, Churchill knew very little about television, commercial or otherwise, and cared even less. He told Moran, ‘I don’t know what all this God-damned fuss is about. I don’t care what happens. The issue doesn’t rouse me at all.’ [Moran, 27xi’53, 500 + Briggs, ‘he was old enough’, 390, Chap. V.1, ‘Exits and Entrances’ for full acc’t] Similarly, in conversation with an old friend, he commented, ‘I don’t care tuppence about this business of

sponsored television’ [Seldon, 552n28] He was content to bow to the party’s views. For all practical purposes, 10 Downing Street had no views.

In one of the major behind-the-scenes policy dramas of the 1950s, Churchill, despite being prime minister, was also nothing more than a bit player. During the winter of 1951-52, the new government found itself facing the possibility of a financial and economic crisis akin to the one that had shaken the Attlee administration in 1947. Soaring world commodity prices – a consequence of the Korean War and the cost of America’s massive rearmament programme – led to the opening up of an alarming balance-of-trade deficit, which was compounded by the economic and financial demands resulting from Britain’s own overly ambitious rearmament drive. As in 1947, the pressures on sterling in late 1951 were intense, and the country’s foreign-currency reserves began to haemorrhage badly. A rapidly deteriorating situation appeared to call for a rapid and drastic response. Leading officials at the Bank of England knew what they thought the response should be: a scheme nicknamed ‘Robot’, according to which the pound’s value in relations to that of other foreign currencies, especially the dollar, would be allowed to float freely so that, if sterling were to remain under pressure, the exchange rate rather than the country’s reserves would take the strain. [RJ, 851-2 + expand] On the advice of most of his Treasury officials, Butler, the chancellor, adopted the scheme as his own and proposed to announce it in his March 1952 budget. However, at the end of a four-hour meeting in February marked by ‘stormy discussions’, the cabinet decided that the scheme should be dropped.

[Seldon, 173, ‘Robot’ + acc’t 171-3] It did not figure in Butler’s budget statement a few weeks later. Throughout the entire episode, the prime minister was almost entirely passive. He was, as Roy Jenkins kindly puts it in his biography of Churchill, ‘fairly detached’: ‘He was much preoccupied with the change of monarch on 6 March [following the death of George VI and the

accession to the throne of Queen Elizabeth], and he did not delude himself that his four and a half years as Chancellor nearly three decades earlier gave him any special command over arcane currency issues.’ [RJ, 852] He was physically present at several of the ministerial meetings that dealt with Robot, but he was intellectually and politically present at none of them. It was Eden, not Churchill, who delivered Robot the *coup de grace*. [explain: Seldon]

On only one occasion did Churchill, the traditionalist, deliberately circumvent the cabinet, but that one occasion was hugely significant. Following months of secret and angst-ridden discussions among the chiefs of staff, scientists, the cabinet secretary and a small group of the most senior ministers, the cabinet’s Defence Policy Committee, with Churchill in the chair, decided on 16 June 1954 that Britain would proceed to manufacture its own hydrogen bomb, that is, join the United States and the Soviet Union in the then exclusive ‘nuclear club’. But for reasons that are not entirely clear Churchill decided that the committee’s decision should stand on its own and should not be referred upwards with a view to obtaining the full cabinet’s approval. It is doubtful whether he feared the full cabinet would reject the idea: there was little chance of that happening. More probably, he feared some kind of inopportune leak, and he perhaps also liked the idea of being seen to be, on this one crucial occasion, in total personal command. Whatever his motives, a large proportion of his colleagues were not best pleased when, three weeks later, the prime minister informed the full cabinet of what had taken place without their being consulted. There then took place what Harold Macmillan described in his diary as ‘the most extraordinary scene’.

It was by now about 1.20pm [the meeting already having gone on for a long time]. Ld Cherwell had been asked to tell the Cabinet what had happened at Washington [where Cherwell, Churchill and Eden had just conferred with their American opposite numbers]

in connection with the exchange of information on thermo-nuclear matters, as far as and even a little farther than the law allowed. This he did. It all appeared very satisfactory. Then P.M. dropped his . . . bomb. He told us that the decision had been taken to make the hydrogen bomb in England, and the preliminaries were in hand. Harry Crookshank [the leader of the House of Commons] at once made a most vigorous protest at such a momentous decision being communicated to the Cabinet in so cavalier a way, and started to walk out of the room. We all did the same and the Cabinet broke up – if not in disorder – in a somewhat ragged fashion. Walter Monckton and Woolton seemed especially shocked! Not, I think, at the decision, (which is probably right) but at the odd way in which things are being done. [HM, *Diaries*, 7vii54, 328-9 + **comment on Crookshank**]

Churchill's position vis-à-vis the cabinet was already weak. His bombshell announcement that day weakened it still further. If he appeared to lack confidence in his colleagues, they were certainly fast losing confidence in him.

In addition to his desire to provide the country with 'several years of quiet steady administration', Churchill returned to office in 1951 with two overriding objectives. He signally failed to achieve the first. He succeeded to an astonishing degree in achieving the second.

His first objective – in effect, his mission from October 1951 until the day of his retirement – was to do whatever he personally could to reduce the chances of all-out war breaking out between the Soviet Union and the Western democracies. His focus during his second premiership was entirely on foreign affairs, especially on the frightening Cold War that had broken out between the communist and liberal-democratic blocs. He believed, as he always had done, in a strong national defence; hence his support for the Labour government and Ernest

Bevin when they helped negotiate the creation of NATO and his subsequent belief that, if the United States and the Soviet Union both possessed nuclear weapons, then Great Britain, as one of the world's great powers, must possess them too. However, far from being the warmonger that some of his contemporary critics portrayed him as being, he had an abiding abhorrence of war, derived largely from his extensive personal experience of it. For him, the development of atomic and then nuclear weapons made the thought of an all-out war between East and West too horrible to contemplate. Having been the staunch ally of both the United States and the Soviet Union during the Second World War, he believed that he was uniquely well placed to negotiate some kind of rapprochement between them. Britain must remain on close terms with the United States, but at the same time it must try to bridge the gulf between that country and the Soviet Union. Churchill cast himself in the role of chief bridge-builder, determined to organise top-level summit meetings between or among the leaders of the three great powers.

Between 1951 and 1955, much of his time, and even more of his energy, were devoted to achieving that end. His colleagues, including Eden, broadly supported him in this endeavour, though several doubted his chances of success and more than a few thought he had become obsessional. He corresponded at length with both American and Soviet leaders and on four separate occasions – in January 1952, January 1953, December 1953 and June-July 1954 – crossed the Atlantic to confer first with President Truman, then with President-elect Eisenhower and finally with President-in-office Eisenhower, always with a view to securing American agreement to direct – or even indirect, via Churchill – talks with the Soviet leadership.

Unfortunately, neither the Americans, for their reasons, and the Russians, for theirs, were interested. Although Churchill could not bring himself to admit it, there was no market on either side of the Iron Curtain in which he could sell his goods. [**'Iron Curtain', MG,VIII, 1036**]

Over nearly four years, disappointment crowded in upon disappointment. His ultimate sense of failure, and his anguish, revealed themselves in his last major speech to the House of Commons, the one that took twenty hours to prepare and that he dictated all himself:

What ought we to do? Which way shall we turn to save our lives and the future of the world? It does not matter so much to old people; they are going soon anyway; but I find it poignant to look at youth in all its activity and ardour and, most of all, to watch little children playing their merry games, and wonder what would lie before them if God wearied of mankind. **[quoted in MG, VIII, 1098]**

The old warrior-turned-peacemaker's second objective was to remain in office so long as he possibly could, certainly longer than anyone expected him to. His wife Clementine had not wanted him to become prime minister again in the first place, and almost all his colleagues and close associates thought he would serve for a year or two, at most. Churchill, however, had no desire to quit and every desire not to quit. Especially as time went on, he knew he was not the man he had been ('I feel like an aeroplane at the end of its flight, in the dusk, with the petrol running out, in search of a safe landing. '), but at the same time he feared the man that he might become ('I think I shall die quickly once I retire. There would be no purpose in living when there is nothing to do.'). **[Rab, Art ..., 173; Moran, 16xii'54, 623]** However, for the time being he believed that he did have something to do – in his own words, 'the building of a sure and lasting peace' – and he harboured doubts, as people who have long held power often do, about the abilities of all his possible successors. **[RJ, 870, '53 party conf speech]** Accordingly, he conducted month after month, year after year, 'one of the most brilliant delaying actions in history' even though it was evident to all those around him that he was not doing his job as prime minister properly, if at all. **[RJ, 846]** Even before he suffered a stroke in the summer of 1963,

which put him out of action for fully three months, there was mounting evidence of his decline. As early as the end of 1951, Lord Mountbatten, who had served under him during the war, wrote gloomily: ‘My impressions of this grand old man are that he is really past his prime. He was very deaf and kept having to have things repeated to him. He quoted poetry at great length.’

[Ziegler, M, 503] The grand old man had his good days, and sometimes even good weeks, and he could usually, if not always, rise to great occasions; but, in addition to quoting poetry at great length (which he often did), he read prodigious numbers of novels as well as the proofs of his own war memoirs, he persisted in showing little interest in domestic affairs, he frequently failed to prepare himself properly for meetings (on one occasion he became so engrossed in the novel he was reading that he failed to apply himself to a cabinet paper that was due to be discussed in half an hour’s time), his chairmanship of cabinet meetings could be, and often was, garrulous and dilatory to the point of absurdity (with the cabinet on one occasion having to meet twice on the same day because Churchill talked so much and attended to the agenda so little), and he spent many hundreds of hours playing, along with patient members of his inner circle, a two-player card game called bezique, a complicated game requiring intense concentration and skill on the part of both contestants. **[RJ illustrations?]** By the winter of 1953-54, almost all his senior colleagues desperately wished he would go. His delayed departure was a continual distraction. Eden actually told an aide he thought the prime minister was ‘gaga’. **[Shuckburgh, 157]**

On top of all that, Churchill was frequently absent in body as well as mind. On those occasions, Number 10 was vacant literally as well as figuratively. Others had to run the government day to day, and others had to chair cabinet meetings (which were as frequent in his absence as in his presence.) The prime minister spent a lot of time at Chequers and Chartwell, his country home in Kent. He invariably took long summer holidays, typically abroad. His

journeys to the United States took up a great deal of time both en route (on several occasions he chose to cross the Atlantic by sea) and in meetings with American officials; and he almost always extended his visits to Washington and New York by paying side visits to Ottawa, sometimes followed by short holidays further south in the sun. His stroke in 1953 resulted in an extended absence, with the government effectively left in the hands of Butler (Eden was also absent), John ('Jock') Colville, the innermost member of Churchill's inner circle, and Christopher Soames, his son-in-law, who also happened to be his parliamentary private secretary. Colville and Soames, at least, were determined to do only what the great man himself would have done had he been fit and well. [quote Colville, 668-9] Between the end of June and mid-August 1953, Butler presided over no fewer than sixteen consecutive cabinet meetings. With Churchill again unavailable, Eden was left in 1954 to preside over five of the seven cabinet meeting held between the end of November and Christmas. As Roy Jenkins mordantly puts it in his biography, 'If Churchill was clinging to his responsibilities, he was taking them fairly lightly.' [RJ, 891] By now Churchill's cabinet was no longer *his* cabinet in any meaningful sense. To adapt a phrase later used of John Major, he was still in office but not remotely in power.

Why, then, was he not ousted from office as well as power? Part of the answer lies in Churchill's glorious past and his still captivating personality. Part of it lies in his consummate tactical skills as a politician. Part of it lies in his sheer dogged determination to continue. But most of it lies in the temperaments and calculations of those who might have ousted him. They were incapable of acting either individually or in concert. When Churchill suffered his stroke in 1953, Butler could almost certainly have seized the throne by insisting on *being* prime minister as well as *acting* as prime minister and making it clear that he would resign if he failed to get his

way. Fortunately for Butler, Anthony Eden, Churchill's heir apparent, was more than two thousand miles away in Boston at the time, slowly recuperating from his third abdominal operation within three months, and in Britain no election was pending. Both the public and the Conservative party would have accepted that Churchill's retirement under the circumstances and his replacement by Butler were both unavoidable. But Butler was neither ruthless enough nor ambitious enough to act the part of Brutus, let alone of Cassius, to Churchill's Caesar. Then, as on subsequent occasions, he showed himself to lack 'the last six inches of steel'; [ref?] he did nothing to advance his own cause (or, indeed, to do anything else with it). Throughout Churchill's tenure, Eden was far more ambitious than Butler but not a whit more ruthless. He was Churchill's preferred successor, and Churchill never tried even to hint to him that anything other than that was the case. But that did Eden no good in the course of his many efforts to persuade Churchill to retire. On the contrary, although Eden continually pressed Churchill to go, or at least to reveal to him precisely when he intended to go, Churchill invariably, in response, played with him as a cat plays with a mouse. Churchill wooed him, flattered him, cajoled him and frequently fought with him – but always confident in the knowledge that, however frustrated and angry Eden became, he would not, because he could not, resign solely on the ground that Churchill would not allow him to fulfil what was, after all, no more than his personal ambition. Eden, sensibly, had no desire to self-destruct, possibly taking his party with him.

The number of attempts to prise Churchill out of office was countless, but those who wished to see him removed – whether in the national interest, the government's interest, the Conservative party's interest or, indeed, in Churchill's own interest – were at least as disorganised and ineffectual as those on the Labour side who had attempted to unseat Attlee in 1947. As early as February 1962, Jock Colville, Lord Moran and Lord Salisbury (one of his

ministers whom Churchill did not much like and referred to dismissively as ‘Old Sarum’) hatched a well-intentioned plan under which Churchill might remain prime minister, but only in the House of Lords. In June 1954, Eden and Macmillan, not yet a contender for the highest office, wrote separately to the prime minister imploring him to stand aside well in advance of the next election. By mid July, it was evident that a clear majority of the cabinet wanted him out. In December of the same year, assumed to be a pre-election year, a seven-man delegation of senior ministers, comprising Eden, Butler, Macmillan, Salisbury, Woolton, Crookshank and James Stuart (the Scottish secretary who had been Churchill’s wartime chief whip) went to see Churchill, nominally to discuss the date of the forthcoming election but actually to broach the subject of Churchill’s retirement. In the event, it was Churchill who did the broaching. Eden’s diary entry for 22 December 1954 captures the flavour of the occasion. After a certain amount of desultory conversation:

W[inston] rounded on me and said it was clear we wanted him out. Nobody contradicted him. . . . At the end W said menacingly that he would think over what his colleagues had said & let them know his decision. Whatever it was he hoped it would not affect their present relationship with him. Nobody quailed. James [Stuart] said afterwards to me that it had been painful but absolutely necessary. He had to be told he could not pursue a course of ‘such utter selfishness’. **[Eden quoted in RR-J, *Eden*, 393]**

Churchill, implacably stubborn, rebuffed the December deputation’s plea as he had rebuffed all previous suggestions that he might, after all, like to retire. However, by the spring of 1955 – old, sad, knowing that he would have to retire one day and knowing, too, that his colleagues no longer had confidence in him – Churchill had given up hope of remaining in office. Finally, of

his own volition, he stood down on 5 April 1955. He left Downing Street for the last time the next day. It was not a happy ending.

A word should be added about the relations between Churchill and his immediate predecessor. Attlee was a Labour stalwart but not an intense partisan; he liked and wrote affectionately to Anthony Eden, who responded ‘My dear Clem . . . Yours ever, Anthony’.

[DRT, *Eden*, 321-2, post Potsdam] For his part, Churchill was hardly a party man at all, having changed sides twice in the course of a long career (‘ratted and re-ratted’, as he put it), and he accepted the Conservative party leadership only after he had already served for six months as prime minister. **[exact quotation]** Attlee liked and admired Churchill, and Churchill admired and got on well with Attlee. The two men, although never personally close, had worked extraordinarily well together during the war. Various derogatory comments about Attlee were attributed to Churchill, but he denied being the source of almost all of them. **[expand in n.]** The country’s wartime leader was undoubtedly a combative man, and after the war he frequently crossed swords with Attlee in the House of Commons, but he was not given by nature to belligerence and the political differences between him and Attlee were never allowed to become personal. Neither of them was mean-spirited, small-minded, bilious or a schemer. Churchill often annoyed Conservative backbenchers by praising Attlee in the Commons chamber, and Attlee frequently paid public tribute to Churchill. On 30 November 1954, Winston Churchill celebrated his 80th birthday at a splendid event, attended by hundreds of MPs, peers and other notables, in Westminster Hall adjacent to the House of Commons. One of the principal speakers – whose speech was widely praised – was Clement Attlee.