

Anthony King

British Prime Ministers Since 1945: Introduction

I have never been a prime minister and have never been in a position to observe closely – on a day-to-day basis -- a prime minister at work. In that respect, I am at a serious disadvantage compared with Richard E Neustadt, author of the greatest of all books on political leadership in the United States, *Presidential Power*, which he wrote as an academic political scientist but only after he had worked in the White House for three years on the staff of President Harry S Truman. *Presidential Power* is in no sense a memoir, but its every page is informed by Neustadt's hands-on experiences as a middle-ranking White House staffer.

I have had no experience comparable to Neustadt's; but, against that and unlike the majority (though by no means all) of my academic colleagues, I did work part-time but quite extensively as a freelance political broadcaster and journalist for the better part of five decades, between the early 1960s and the 2000s. During that time, I often had face-to-face encounters with prime ministers and with past and future prime ministers. In a book about prime ministers and the office of prime minister, it seems only fitting to devote a few pages to describing some of the more telling of those many encounters.

The first prime minister I ever met – although by then he had been out of office for eight years – was Clement Attlee. During the winter of 1959, as a postgraduate student not long off the boat from Canada, I was dating the intelligent and beautiful daughter of G.R. ('Russell') Strauss, who had been minister of supply in Attlee's postwar Labour government. A rich man, Strauss lived in style at one of London's most magnificent addresses, 1 Kensington Palace Gardens (now, alas, demolished). During the 1930s, he had been on the far left of the Labour party, an advocate of creating an anti-fascist 'popular front', designed to bring together

communists and socialists of every hue in the struggle against Hitler, Mussolini and Franco. By the time I met him, his views had moderated considerably, but he still had many friends on the left, including Aneurin Bevan, and during the 1950s he was a prominent member of the so-called Keep Calm Group, which sought, largely in vain, to build bridges across the chasmic left-right division that then existed within the party.

As part of that enterprise and following Labour's shattering defeat in the October 1959 general election, its third electoral defeat in a row, Strauss decided to throw a big party at his Kensington Palace Gardens residence. Everybody who was anybody in the Labour party at the time was invited, and most of them came. Hugh Gaitskell, the right-wing Labour leader, was there. So was Nye Bevan. Guests commented that they had never expected to see such a disparate group of people in the same room at the same time, apparently able to enjoy, or at least to tolerate, one another's company. I was present strictly in my capacity as our host's daughter's current boyfriend.

During the course of the evening, with the drink flowing and the decibel level rising, I noticed that there was one well-known individual in the room to whom no one was talking. The conversation swirled continuously around him, never pausing or stopping. He was alone amidst the throng. It struck me as strange that no one seemed to want to talk to him, of all people: Clem Attlee, Labour leader until only four years before and a former prime minister; so, glass in hand, I approached him tentatively with a view to making conversation.

It was easy. A few weeks before, a biography of King George VI had been published, whose author claimed that in 1945 the king had played a decisive role in determining the shape of Attlee's new cabinet. Attlee had intended to make Hugh Dalton foreign secretary and Ernest Bevin chancellor of the exchequer. According to the biography, the king had persuaded Attlee to

do the opposite: to send Dalton to the Treasury, Bevin to the Foreign Office. I asked Attlee whether there was any truth in all this. 'None at all', said Attlee. He seemed half irritated, half amused by the very suggestion. He would never have dreamt of giving the talented but vain, indiscreet and almost certainly homosexual Dalton the job of dealing on Great Britain's behalf with the likes of Truman and Stalin. That was obviously a job for Ernie Bevin, the most loyal of men and the toughest of negotiators. He had never considered anyone else. In any case, Dalton was a distinguished academic economist. Why waste him on the Foreign Office? Attlee obviously did not mind being asked a potentially sensitive question by a young man he had never met, and his answer was crisp and unpompous (though in that more straitlaced age he may only have alluded to Dalton's alleged homosexuality).

He asked me about myself. I told him I was, or recently had been, a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. Which college? Magdalen. What had I read? PPE. Degree class? A First – and I couldn't resist boasting that I had been congratulated by the examiners. He seemed genuinely impressed. 'I read Modern History at Univ', he said, adding unabashedly, 'I got a gentleman's Second', which he implied was not a very good Second. He seemed genuinely pleased when I told him what pleasure Labour's great victory in 1945 had given my parents and their friends in Toronto. 'The Old Country has come to its senses at last', someone had said to my mother in the street. We must have chatted for about twenty minutes or half an hour, and, although I greatly enjoyed my chance to talk to a former prime minister, I did not initially make much of the encounter, which seemed perfectly normal. It was only a week or so later that my girlfriend told me that the spectacle of Clem talking affably and at length with someone – anyone – had caused a considerable sensation. 'Who was that young man?', people were asking. It was only then that I discovered that Clem had a fearsome reputation for taciturnity, for never using one word when

none would do. Talking to Clem, the saying went, was like feeding biscuits to a dog – and a damned hungry dog at that. Needless to say, had I been aware of Clem's reputation, I would never have dreamt of approaching him.

Although I caught glimpses of Churchill from time to time, mostly in the House of Commons, I never met either him or Anthony Eden. Harold Macmillan was another matter. On his retirement as prime minister in 1963, Macmillan returned to the family publishing firm, where he was known to the staff as 'Mr Harold'. As it happened, Macmillan's firm had published the Nuffield College series of books on British general elections almost since its inception, and David Butler had persuaded me to collaborate with him in writing the volume on the next election, due sometime during 1964. Given that the former prime minister was also, in effect, our publisher, there was no problem about obtaining an interview with him. We asked him a lot of questions, all of which he answered in his own way, which usually meant more histrionically than informatively. We learned little about the politics of his recent resignation but a good deal about how the whole business had felt, literally as well as figuratively. Following his emergency prostate operation, he had lain there in his hospital bed in considerable physical discomfort (he emphasised, pointing gloomily down towards his crotch). He had already tendered his formal resignation and almost immediately afterwards awoke from a nap to find a team of Post Office engineers at the bottom of his bed disconnecting the array of secure telephone lines that connected the prime minister, as prime minister, to his government and the wider world. Now he was no longer prime minister. The removal of the phones was as symbolic as it was practical. I remember thinking at the time that Macmillan, a wise man, was not making the same mistake as foolish King Lear, who fondly imagined that his power resided in himself rather than in his crown. Macmillan lived for another two decades and could

occasionally be seen walking alone in a central London street, apparently unrecognised. If he had not sought anonymity, anonymity had certainly sought him.

Macmillan was a good deal cleverer than Lear in ordering his succession. He wanted his successor to be the 14th Earl of Home, whom he knew could quickly be parachuted back into the House of Commons as Sir Alec Douglas-Home. And what Macmillan wanted he got.

Thereupon David Butler and I succeeded in obtaining an interview with the new prime minister. He greeted us affably upstairs in Number 10 and answered all our questions directly and succinctly. His answers were more bland than revelatory, but we had no realistic expectation of revelations and the broad outlines of the Conservatives' strategy for fighting the imminent election were already well known and unlikely to change under the new man. Indeed, so succinct were Sir Alec's answers to our questions that we soon ran out of questions. We had imagined that we would have roughly twenty minutes with the great man and had planned accordingly. But twenty minutes came and went, and Sir Alec showed no signs of wanting us to leave. In desperation we finally indicated that it was probably time for us to go, whereupon he rose and said instead, 'Would you like to see round the place?' We replied 'Of course', and he then proceeded to take us on a leisurely tour of Number 10, which had recently been reoccupied by the prime minister and his staff after extensive renovations. It was abundantly clear to both of us that, whatever else he was, Sir Alec was not the chief operating officer of this particular firm.

Writing these pages, I am surprised to realise that I saw far more of Harold Wilson during his time as Labour leader and prime minister than I saw of any other postwar prime minister. It must have been partly because I worked with David Butler on the 1966 Nuffield election study as well that of 1964. It undoubtedly had much to do with the fact that during the 1960s and 1970s – during the period of Wilson's political ascendancy – I was a constant presence in radio

and television studios and green rooms. I appeared often on *Newnight* during its early days, presented Radio 4's *Ten O'Clock* programme (predecessor to *The World Tonight*) at least once a week and on election nights invariably turned up to analyse the results – by-election as well as general-election results in the days when by-elections were thought to matter. Whatever the reason, Harold and I, although never remotely intimate (I never had lunch with him alone), were friendly acquaintances throughout, on easy-going first-name terms. He himself was utterly without side.

One evening during the early 1970s, my wife and I were having a relaxed dinner at a restaurant near the Palace of Westminster with our old chums Roy Hattersley (later, in Neil Kinnock's time, deputy leader of the Labour party) and his wife. The Hattersleys were sitting with their backs to a wall, facing into the restaurant. The Kings were sitting facing the Hattersleys, so could not see what was going on anywhere else. But the Kings and the Hattersleys alike could certainly hear what was going on. At a nearby table, a large group of self-satisfied, self-important louts – otherwise known in those days as Sloane Rangers or Hooray Henrys – were making a great racket, barking, guffawing and shouting at one another, oblivious of the fact that they were in a public place and that other diners were present. Hattersley began by glowering, then muttered several times under his breath 'I hate them. I hate them.' When the four of us finally left, the Hattersleys, who lived nearby, set off on foot. My wife and I went in search of a taxi; but, as there was none to be found along Millbank, we decided to join the queue in the cab rank in New Palace Yard next to the House of Commons – a large space then open to the public, now cordoned off. The person immediately ahead of us in the queue, waiting for a cab like the rest of us, was Harold Wilson. We said hello, and I told him about the experience we had just had in the restaurant, but without telling him (for some reason) who it was that had

muttered ‘I hate them. I hate them’ I was about to tell him who the person had been when he interrupted me: ‘No, no, don’t tell me. I know who it was. It was Hattersley.’ Harold was an acute observer of his fellow human beings as well as of politics.

Before they ceased to be political dramas and became mere spectacles, I used to attend all the major annual party conferences. Harold Wilson’s last as party leader and prime minister was held in Blackpool. The BBC rigged up a temporary radio studio in the basement of the Imperial Hotel, and one night I wandered into the improvised green room nearby and found myself listening to a *Ten O’Clock* interview with the prime minister, which was being broadcast from the studio just across the hall. The interviewer, someone who had insisted on remaining in London and had no feel for what was going on in Blackpool, was making a mess of it, asking questions about things that had not happened and alluding to events that had not occurred. Wilson was audibly irritated. Suddenly, the interview over, I realised that he and his small entourage were crossing the hall from the studio into the green room, where clearly Wilson was going to want to have a drink (or two).

Not wanting to join the party, I darted behind a curtain drawn across the room, imagining that the curtain was merely there to divide a large room into two. Instead, I found that it had been drawn to conceal a wall, leaving little more than a foot between the curtain and the wall. On realising that, I would probably have joined the party after all, except that, as he approached, I heard Harold say in a loud voice, ‘That interview was terrible. The fellow didn’t know what he was talking about. Why didn’t you have Tony King doing it? I’ve seen him up here.’ Whereupon he and his little group entered the room. At that point I felt I could hardly make my presence known. I was trapped behind the curtain. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t cough. I couldn’t sneeze. I could scarcely breathe. And, for all I knew, the post-interview drinks might

go on for an hour or more. Fortunately, although the wait seemed an eternity, it probably lasted no more than twenty minutes. Wilson and his people departed, and I emerged safely, much to the hilarity of the members of the BBC staff who were still in the room clearing up. They pointed out that at least I had not been run through behind my arras like poor Polonius behind his.

The last time I spoke to Harold was in the bowels of the BBC's old Television Centre in White City a year or so after he had stood down as prime minister. Presumably for archival reasons, the BBC wanted to record, on old-fashioned cinema film, a series of extended interviews with Harold covering the whole of his life and career. The interviewer throughout was to have been my fellow Canadian Robert McKenzie, but ill health forced him to drop out early on and I was recruited to take his place. One static camera was positioned facing Harold, another facing me. And off we went. Sadly, Harold by this time was starting to suffer in a small way from the dementia to which he eventually succumbed. His once-vaunted memory was fading. Still, we managed to talk for long enough to capture some good broadcastable material on film, but it was hard work on my part, and I was pretty bored much of the time, with the result that at one point, with Harold still chuntering on, I fell asleep – for how long I have no idea, probably not for long, perhaps for only a nano-second. But somewhere buried in the BBC's archives there must be a shot of me suddenly waking up in the middle of an interview with a former prime minister.

Perhaps partly because he was much less gregarious than Wilson, I had much less contact with Jim Callaghan in any of his ministerial incarnations than with his predecessor. I did, however, interview him often down the line from whichever studio I was in to wherever he happened to be. I never looked forward to interviewing him. He was always formally polite, but

his tone was almost invariably defensive-aggressive, as though one were trying to catch him out even when asking him relatively bland questions. Like Michael Heseltine in a later generation, Harold Wilson positively enjoyed verbal jousting. Jim did not. But he became altogether more relaxed soon after he left office, or so it seemed to me. One day during the last phase of his life, my wife and I found ourselves sitting next to him at the preview of a television film.

Remembering me better than I expected him to, he asked me straightaway, 'Are you still at Essex?' To which the answer was (as it still would be) 'Yes'. Then, realising that the person sitting next to me was there with me, he leaned over and quietly introduced himself to my wife: 'Hello, I'm Jim Callaghan.' No former prime minister who feels he should introduce himself like that, even out of sheer politeness, can be accused of overweening pride.

My various encounters with Ted Heath began reasonably well but ended very badly and semi-publicly. On an early occasion, Ted invited my wife and me to a drinks party in his flat in Albany, the discreet bachelor residence next door to the Royal Academy in Piccadilly. The occasion was black-tie, the wine was champagne, and most of the late-1960s Tory establishment was there. As at most drinks parties, the guests quickly sorted themselves out into little groups each of which, conversationally, went its own way. Ted, like any good host, moved inconspicuously from group to group. But after a while my wife and I noticed something odd. Whenever Ted approached a group, the conversation in that group, however animated it had been, suddenly died down, as though air had been let out of a balloon. The conversation in the group would be stilted, or there would be none at all, until Ted moved on again. A pall of silence seemed to follow him everywhere. Shortly afterwards, I spoke to a woman who had sat on Ted's right at a dinner. He never once spoke to her. She had then commented to the woman who had sat on Ted's left, 'You must have had an interesting time talking to Ted.' 'Not at all',

came the response, 'he didn't say a word to me all evening.' Likewise, a man who had photographed Ted dozens of times for portraits, magazine articles, party publications and such like expressed puzzlement that the great man had never once acknowledged that the two of them had ever met before.

Our encounters during Ted's time first as leader of the opposition and then as prime minister were pleasant enough, if a bit stiff, but our last meeting, years after he had been ousted as party leader by Margaret Thatcher, was most peculiar. It even drew a small crowd. My wife and I were attending a garden party on lawns sweeping down to the banks of the Thames in west London. Our host was a Tory grandee, in the days when there really were such people. However, there was present one distinguished guest to whom, Attlee-like, no one was speaking. After a while, our host came up to me and said gently but firmly 'Please go and talk to Ted.' I said I would and meant what I said, but then found all sorts of excuses for putting off talking to him: I kept being waylaid by people I knew and had not seen for a long time – that sort of thing. But I was by no means to be let off. Our host sought me out again, saying somewhat less gently and a good deal more firmly: '*Please* go and talk to Ted.'

So, dutifully, I did. The obvious topic of conversation was our shared interest in classical music. Ted was well known to be a music lover and on one occasion had gone so far as to conduct the London Symphony Orchestra. Musical performances had played a large part in his recent birthday celebrations. But Ted was having none of it. I had been a member of the Committee on Standards in Public Life – the original Nolan Committee – which John Major as prime minister had established in the wake of a series of financial scandals involving members of parliament, mostly Conservatives. The committee had recommended that members of the House of Commons should be required to register the amounts and sources of all their outside income

that was in any way related to their performance of their parliamentary duties. Our recommendation was accepted by a large Commons majority. For reasons best known to himself, Ted was one of the few parliamentary dissentients, a very vocal one. Our chance garden-party encounter gave him another opportunity to hold forth. He insisted that all MPs should be regarded as ‘honourable members’ (rather implying that they should be so regarded even if they patently were not). He was emphatic that the privacy of private members of the House – of whom he was one – was to be respected under all circumstances. He clearly regarded the Nolan Committee’s principal financial-disclosure recommendation as monstrous and addressed me personally as though, beyond doubt, I personally had been the Monster-in-Chief, even though I had been only a rank-and-file member of the committee. My attempts to point out that the Nolan Committee’s recommendation had been unanimous and that it had been backed by large majorities on both sides of the House of Commons simply bounced off him. He became louder and louder, redder and redder in the face and also, it must be said, less and less rational. By the end, some three dozen guests at the party had gathered round to witness Ted’s performance. A large proportion of them looked absolutely astonished. I certainly was – and still am.

(Actually, the high point of that evening had nothing to do with either the former prime minister or me. One of the grandsons of our host, aged about three, perhaps fed up with being left out of the party, positioned himself on the balcony of our host’s house, pulled out his willy and proceeded to spray-pee every guest within range. Fortunately, the number of guests standing near enough to the house to be within range, was relatively small; but they all ran, if not for their lives, then at least for their clothes, some of which must have been haute couture. Those at a safe distance tried to conceal their amusement. The young offender was hastily bundled indoors.)

Ted Heath's nemesis, Margaret Thatcher, could be brusque and assertive to – and sometimes beyond – the point of rudeness, but I was lucky: on the rare occasions I met her, she could not have been more gracious and considerate. Sometime during the early 1970s, during her time as secretary of state for education, I was in the course of making a Radio 4 documentary on women in politics, of whom at that time there were remarkably few. She and I and the BBC's producer were due to meet at a certain hour in the BBC's old radio studio off College Green in Westminster. It was shortly before Christmas, I was behind with my Christmas shopping, and I foolishly bought one present too many, thereby starting to run late. On top of that, there were holdups on the Northern Line. By the time I reached the studio, I was running nearly a quarter of an hour late and was on the verge of panic: although Mrs Thatcher (no one called her Margaret) had not been in office for long, she was already known as a stickler for punctuality. Needless to say, I explained what had happened and made the most effusive, abject apologies. What else could I do? But, although she was already in the studio and well settled in, Mrs T was neither cold nor angry and even made excuses on my behalf. She acknowledged that last-minute Christmas shopping could be a frightful nuisance, and of course she knew all about the awfulness of the Northern Line. It ran through her Finchley constituency, and her constituents were constantly complaining to her about it. So I was not to feel badly about being late. She quite understood.

Partly as a result of that encounter, I was not at all surprised when, at a drinks party a few weeks after the 1979 election, I ran into a senior civil servant who had worked until the election in Jim Callaghan's private office in Number 10 and was now, following the Conservatives' victory in the election, working in Mrs T's. I asked him which of the two people he preferred working for. He unhesitatingly said 'Mrs Thatcher', even though I was pretty sure he had voted

Labour at the election. ‘Jim’, he said, ‘regarded you as merely an extension of himself, there to do whatever he wanted you to do, as though you had no existence apart from him.’ Thatcher could not be more different. Before long, she knew the name of your wife and even the names of your children. She apologised if she kept you working late or interfered with your family responsibilities. If she did keep you working late, she would often disappear upstairs to the family flat and return moments later with sandwiches and coffee. There were other sides to Margaret Thatcher’s personality, of course; but there was also – and always was – that side.

When I first met John Major, I scarcely knew who he was. I certainly did not recognise him. The year was 1988. The occasion was a by-election in the constituency of Epping Forest, where the BBC, then far more lavish than it has since become, had erected an elegant temporary studio graced with a glorious view of Waltham Abbey. Major then occupied the relatively lowly position of chief secretary to the Treasury under Thatcher. Almost no one then thought of him as a future prime minister. Indeed almost no one thought of him at all. But in the course of pre-broadcast conversation he immediately struck me as someone a cut well above most of his fellow political practitioners: thoughtful, disarmingly polite, willing to listen as well as to talk and, not least, highly intelligent. Lacking prevision, I had no notion that two years later Conservative MPs would elect him as party leader, and therefore prime minister, in succession to Thatcher, let alone that he would lead his party to victory at the next general election and hold office for the better part of seven years. But I may well have been less surprised by those developments than some.

As prime minister, especially in his early days, Major gave the impression of having been rendered uneasy by having risen so far so fast. He had served as foreign secretary under Thatcher for only a few months and as chancellor for little more than a year. His two defeated rivals for

the Tory leadership, Michael Heseltine and Douglas Hurd, were both older and had had infinitely more experience in high office. In the presence of others, he freely acknowledged that being prime minister involved climbing the steepest learning curve of his life. In particular, despite his brief turns as foreign secretary and chancellor, he had not realised that a prime minister – any prime minister – had to devote so much time to Europe and European matters. He frequently felt, or gave the impression that he felt, put upon. When a newspaper cartoon in the mid 1990s suggested that his government had got something wrong but that, on this occasion, he as prime minister was not to blame, he wrote to the cartoonist to voice his gratitude and wonder whether he might acquire the original of the cartoon. In his case, pride and diffidence walked hand in hand.

From the mid 1990s onwards, largely because I found myself less often in broadcast studios and had retreated more and more into print journalism and after that into book writing, my encounters with past, present and future prime ministers became less frequent. My entries into the mental and political worlds of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, while vivid in their way, were almost entirely second-hand. In early June 1994, when it was clear that Tony Blair was about to become Labour leader although he had not yet been elected, five by-elections were held, unusually, on the same day. Four of the five were in seats that Labour already held, but even so the swings to Labour in three of the four were enormous. It looked as though Labour – not yet rechristened New Labour but about to become so – was on the move. The next morning Tony Blair and his press aide, Alastair Campbell, suddenly swept into the BBC's Millbank studios, where I was working. Blair, looking harassed rather than either pleased or relieved, spotted me and asked nervously, 'Has something really happened?' 'Yes', I replied, 'something really has.' And, as events soon proved, it really had. My one attempt to make contact with Gordon Brown,

also in the 1990s, took the form of an old-fashioned letter with a stamp on it inviting him to lunch. No response was forthcoming. Apparently that was typical. Like most people, I viewed David Cameron from a discreet distance, wholly reliant on his words and actions rather than on any form of direct contact.

This introduction has been personal. From now on, the treatment in this book will be more – indeed wholly – detached. It will have nothing to do with my personal likes or dislikes. It will, I hope, be clinical in its objectivity. Fortunately, objectivity does not preclude humour. As will become evident, politics and politicians can sometimes be hilarious. Perhaps it would be good if they could be so more often.