

# BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS

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## **Clement Richard Attlee, First Earl Attlee, 1883-1967**

Bridges

*Biogr. Mems Fell. R. Soc.* 1968 **14**, 15-36, published 1 November 1968

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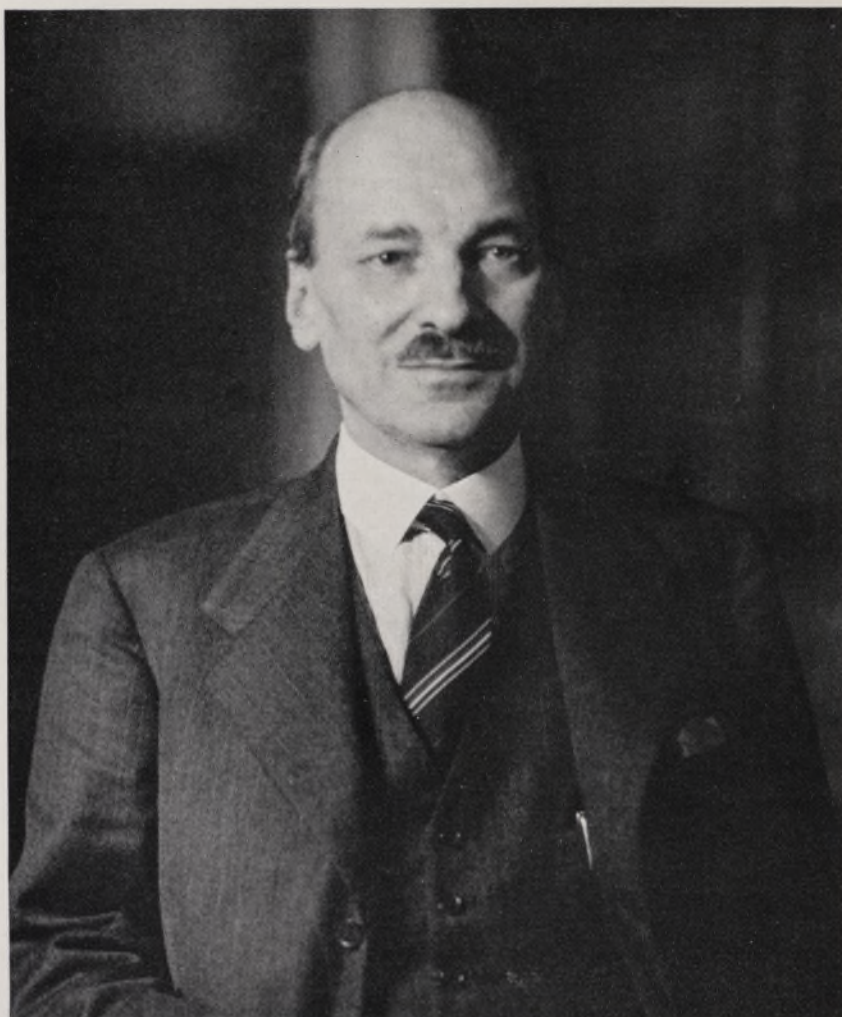
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## CLEMENT RICHARD ATTLEE

### FIRST EARL ATTLEE

1883-1967

Elected F.R.S. 1947

#### *Introductory*

A biographical Memoir in this series which deals with the life of a distinguished statesman presents certain difficulties. These are specially acute in the case of one who sat in the House of Commons for 33 years and then for another 12 years in the Lords: who was Prime Minister for 6 years, and leader of the Opposition for over 8 years. Any attempt to describe all the events in which he played an important part would involve a potted political history of this country over 40 years.

It is clearly impossible to attempt anything so comprehensive. The right course is surely to select the events in Attlee's lifetime, the tasks he undertook, or the offices which he held, which were of special significance in shaping his career, or in bringing to the surface his own special interests and aptitudes, and his services to the country.

The selection of what should be included may seem presumptuous in one who never met Lord Attlee before 1940. But the autobiography published in 1954, under the title *As it happened* provides a clear and frank account of his early life, and of how his interests developed. The early part of this Memoir is very largely based on material drawn from this book.

#### *Antecedents and education*

The Attlee family lived for many generations near Dorking in Surrey. Many of them were farmers or millers. By the date of Attlee's birth, the Attlee clan belonged to the professional classes, and comprised several families of Victorian proportions. Clement Attlee was the seventh child, and the fourth son of a family of eight. His father, Henry Attlee, was a Solicitor with a good practice who became President of the Incorporated Law Society, and lived in Putney.

Clement Attlee's education followed the conventional pattern of the professional classes. He went to a Preparatory School at Potter's Bar; then, like all his brothers, to Haileybury College and after that to Oxford. It was decided that he should go to University College, the chief reason for the choice being apparently that his elder brothers had gone to other Colleges (Corpus Christi, Oriel and Merton).



Clement Attlee did not distinguish himself in any very marked way while at Oxford. He read History, and got a Second Class, with which, he says, he was well content; although his tutor had thought that he might get a First. He himself has recorded that his three years at Oxford were exceedingly happy. He was (he thought) perhaps rather young for his years and took life easily. His bent at that period of his life was wholly romantic, his main interests being history and poetry. He also tells us that he did not read for his schools with any great assiduity, but was beguiled into all sorts of miscellaneous reading.

Moreover, while at Oxford, he belonged to no political clubs, and took no active part in politics. He was a member of the Union, but owing to his shyness never took part in Union debates. Indeed, his only essay in speaking while at Oxford was at a College debating society, when he championed Protection against Sir Basil Blackett who stood for Free Trade. At this date he was a Conservative. He had, moreover, given no real thought to social problems, and had no political ambitions. His aim was to find some way of earning a living which would enable him to follow up his interests in history and literature.

*Social service. The East End (1905-1914)*

In 1904, on leaving Oxford, he started work in London, reading in Chambers. He lived at home at Putney, learned to ride, and shared for a short while a shoot in Sussex with some of his father's friends.

He records that in October 1905 an event occurred which was destined to alter the whole course of his life. Following the tradition of social service in his family, he visited the Boys' Club in Stepney supported by Haileybury College. He became interested in the Club and used to go there regularly once a week. Two years later he took over the post of Club Manager and went to live in Haileybury House. His home was in East London for the next 14 years.

Through living at the Haileybury Club he got to know how people in poor circumstances lived. He admired their generosity to those worse off than themselves. He found 'many instances of kindness and much quiet heroism in these mean streets'. What he saw kindled in him a warmth and affection for those among whom he lived. This led him to examine the basis of our social and economic system. He and his elder brother Tom both became Socialists. In or about 1907 he joined the Fabian Society, the Independent Labour Party and the National Union of Clerks.

The way in which Attlee occupied his time in the years immediately before the outbreak of war in 1914 can best be summarized by listing some of the many tasks which he undertook—all connected with social welfare, or social reform.

In 1909 he ceased to practise at the Bar, and became Lecture-Secretary to a body set up by the Webbs to popularize the proposals in the Minority Report of the Royal Commission on the Poor Law.



In 1910 he became Secretary of Toynbee Hall, and went to live there.

He did work in association with J. J. Mallon in preparation for the Trade Boards Act, 1909.

He was appointed one of the official explainers of the Lloyd George National Insurance Act of 1911.

He became a school manager and an active member of a School Care Committee.

In 1912, through the influence of Sidney Webb, he was appointed a lecturer and tutor at the London School of Economics in the Department of Social Science and Public Administration. He was appointed to this post, not so much by virtue of academic knowledge, but by reason of his practical knowledge of social conditions.

He also did work for the National Union of Clerks and other Trade Unions, and undertook many speaking engagements, particularly in Stepney, but also for other London branches of the I.L.P. He was for a time a candidate for the Stepney Borough Council and for the Limehouse Board of Guardians, but without success.

In these nine years Attlee's whole outlook on life changed. He acquired a wide knowledge of social conditions in East London and held a variety of posts. He had become a convinced and ardent member of the Labour Party. Moreover, he had lost his shyness, and had become an active speaker in the Labour cause.

### *First World War 1914-1918*

At the outbreak of war, Attlee joined the Inns of Court Regiment, and was later posted to the 6th South Lancashire Regiment. In June 1915, being by then a Company Commander, his regiment sailed for Gallipoli, landing from destroyers by night on the beached steamship *River Clyde*, and proceeding to the Gulley Ravine. After a while a severe attack of dysentery led to his being invalided to Malta. On recovery he returned to Gallipoli. His last experience there was being in command of the rearguard holding a perimeter round the evacuation beach.

Next followed a spell in Mesopotamia, where he was wounded in April 1916.

After a further spell in training in England, he served in France with the 5th Territorial Battalion of his Regiment in the 55th Division.

At the time, no doubt, these years in the Army must have seemed simply an interruption of the way of life on which he had embarked. But in later years, these years of active service must surely have provided much relevant background experience.

### *Return to Stepney. Local Government work (1919-1921)*

As soon as he was discharged from the Army, Attlee went back to Stepney. The Haileybury Club being closed, he went to live at Toynbee Hall and also returned to the London School of Economics.



There followed a spell of intense activity in Local Government. He stood for the L.C.C. but was defeated. He was co-opted to the Local Board of Guardians.

In the election for the Borough of Stepney the Labour Party won a resounding victory. Three local Labour parties were concerned, and some difficulty arose between them as to the choice of a Mayor. This was resolved by co-opting Attlee as Mayor. He thus begun his municipal career at the top, as the youngest Mayor that the Borough of Stepney had ever had. It was an eventful year of office which presented many difficult problems, particularly in housing and unemployment.

Attlee's interest and knowledge of Local Government was very considerable. It continued throughout his life although overshadowed by national politics after he entered Parliament.

Shortly afterwards Attlee became Chairman of the Stepney Electricity Undertaking. For many years the affairs of the Electricity Industry generally occupied much of his attention.

In 1922, Attlee married. He gave up living in East London and went to live at Woodford Green.

The Attlees lived at Woodford Green until they moved to Heywood, Stanmore, in 1931. This remained their home until Attlee became Prime Minister when the house was sold and No. 10 became the family home, week-ends being spent at Chequers. They became attached to the Chiltern country and in 1949 making 'provision for eventualities'\* the Attlees bought Cherry Cottage, Prestwood, about six miles from Chequers, which became their home after Attlee lost office at the 1951 election. Later they moved to another house in the same neighbourhood, Westcott, Martin's End, Great Missenden.

After he became a widower Attlee lived in rooms in the Temple.

#### *Parliament. The first years: 1922-1931*

In the autumn of 1922 the Lloyd George Coalition Government fell and there was a General Election. Attlee stood as Labour Candidate for Limehouse. The seat had been held since 1906 by a Liberal, Sir William Pearce, who in 1922 had Conservative support. Attlee won the seat by nearly 2000 votes. Limehouse continued to elect him as their M.P. until 1950, usually with increasing majorities, the exception being in 1931 when his majority fell to 551.

At a meeting of the Labour Party after the Election, Ramsay MacDonald was appointed Sessional Chairman (in preference to J. R. Clynes) and became Leader of the Labour Opposition. He chose Attlee as one of his Parliamentary Private Secretaries. During this Parliament Attlee, as a P.P.S., did not speak often, but learnt the ways of the House.

\* *As it happened*; p. 158.



After the election held in the autumn of 1923, the House contained 191 Labour members, 155 Liberals and 259 Conservatives. A Labour amendment to the Address being supported by the Liberals, the Government was defeated, and Ramsay MacDonald was called on to form a Government. Attlee was appointed Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for War, the Secretary of State being Stephen Walsh who had no previous experience of military affairs. Here Attlee's experience of active service proved very useful. He established very good relations with the senior Army Officers.

The position of Ramsay MacDonald's Minority Government was necessarily precarious, and was ended when the Liberals voted against the Government on the Campbell case. At the ensuing General Election the Liberals lost very heavily indeed. Labour lost 50 seats, and the Conservatives had a comfortable overall majority. But Attlee was returned for Limehouse with his majority virtually unchanged.

Attlee now took his place on the Front Opposition bench. He spoke among other matters on Army Estimates, on the Rating and Valuation Bill, and on the Electricity Bill.

The most important event for Attlee in this Parliament was his appointment, in 1927, as one of the two Labour Members on the Statutory Commission sent out to India to make recommendations about constitutional developments in India. The Commission visited India in 1927 and again in 1928-9. This was work after Attlee's own heart. Moreover, the knowledge he then gained of Indian problems was to prove of great value later on.

When Attlee returned to England from his second visit to India in January 1929, Baldwin had decided to go to the country and a General Election was in full swing.

At Limehouse Attlee had three opponents and was returned with a majority of over 7000. Labour again took office without an overall majority but being now the strongest party in the Commons.

For many months after the General Election, Attlee was busy with the affairs of the India Commission which had not yet reported. Attlee contributed drafts for several chapters in the second volume which gave the Commission's conclusions. This work occupied all his time for many months.

On 20 May 1930, Sir Oswald Mosley, who had been one of four Ministers appointed by the Prime Minister to deal with unemployment, and who had held the office of Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, resigned, and Attlee was appointed Chancellor of the Duchy in his place. He was not, however, used on unemployment matters, although he prepared a paper on the re-equipment and redeployment of Industry, and sat on the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Committee. This body, he records, had some interesting discussions but achieved nothing. He was also employed on a variety of miscellaneous tasks—the most interesting being to assist the P.M. in dealing with the Imperial Conference of 1930.

During 1930, while still Chancellor of the Duchy, Attlee gave help in the Commons to Dr Addison, who had succeeded Lord Noel-Buxton as Minister



of Agriculture. The reason for this arrangement was that the Parliamentary Secretary (Earl De La Warr) was in the Lords, and that the Agricultural Marketing Bill called for another spokesman in the Commons. Attlee found this a stimulating experience. Dr Addison was a skilful pilot of Bills in the House, and Sir Arthur Street (later Permanent Secretary of the Department) was an outstanding administrator.

In March 1931 Attlee succeeded Mr Lees Smith as Postmaster-General. Under his régime a number of useful changes were brought about. Public relations were improved—Sir Stephen Tallents, who had done such good work on the Empire Marketing Board, being brought in for this work. The advice of some able businessmen was also obtained as to which postal services would benefit from advertising and plans were made for setting up a functional council of officials under the Postmaster-General to combat undue centralization. This scheme was later adopted in substance and put into force.

In the period between Attlee's first election to Parliament, and the autumn of 1931 (rather less than 9 years) Attlee had thus filled the following posts: Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Prime Minister; Under Secretary of State for War; Member of the Statutory Commission on constitutional developments in India; Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster; Postmaster-General.

None of these are senior Ministerial appointments. But if a benign and far-seeing providence had wished to give to a future Prime Minister, in his first years in Parliament, experience of a very wide range of Government work, the matter could hardly have been arranged more satisfactorily.

There's no need to include in this biographical note even the briefest account of the financial crisis of 1931, and of the course of events which led to the break-up of the Labour Government in August of that year and the formation thereafter of a Coalition Government under Ramsay MacDonald. These events are well known, and Attlee, who did not hold a Cabinet post was not in a position to influence the critical decisions. He shared to the full the contempt which the Labour party generally felt for Ramsay MacDonald's actions.

*Attlee as Deputy Leader, and later Leader of the Labour Opposition (1931-1940)*

At the General Election held in the autumn of 1931, the number of Members of the Labour Party returned to Parliament (excluding those who supported the Coalition and were described as 'National Labour') was reduced from the 287 returned in 1929 to 46. Apart from Ramsay MacDonald and the Ministers who had joined his Coalition Government, George Lansbury was the sole survivor of the Labour Cabinet. George Lansbury was elected by the Labour Party as their leader, with Attlee as his Deputy. After a time Lansbury invited Sir Stafford Cripps to share the Leader of the Opposition's room in the House of Commons with himself and Attlee.



Those defeated included not only most of the prominent Labour M.P.s, but also very many of those on whose knowledge and experience in particular subjects the party had hitherto relied. As a result the burden of work of speaking for the Opposition fell very largely on a few M.P.s, and particularly on Attlee. He records that he had to speak three or four times a week, and that in 1932, although usually regarded as a laconic speaker, he filled more columns of Hansard than any other M.P. But as the years went by, some of those who had held Cabinet posts in the Labour Government of 1929-31, but had been defeated in 1931, were returned to Parliament at by-elections.

The international tension which showed itself first in the Far East and later in Abyssinia, and the growing distrust of the actions of the Hitler Government in Germany, brought to the surface strains within the Labour Party. While the party as a whole favoured strong support for the League of Nations and was prepared to re-arm to back a genuine Labour policy, the party included a strongly pacifist section led by George Lansbury. This divergence of view came to a head at the time of the Abyssinian crisis. At the Annual Party Conference, held in Brighton in October 1935, the pacifists were defeated. Shortly afterwards Lansbury resigned the leadership and Attlee was elected as leader in his place.

This is perhaps the point at which to record Attlee's view that a Leader of the Opposition, to do his job properly, should be present during the whole of the Parliamentary sittings so that he could take advantage of any position immediately it arose. This is one of the factors which made him so effective in opposition.

At the General Election of 1935, Attlee was again returned as M.P. for Limehouse, this time by over 7000 votes. 154 Labour M.P.s were returned, including several who had previously held Cabinet posts—including J. R. Clynes, Herbert Morrison, A. V. Alexander and Tom Johnston. Attlee characteristically took no steps in regard to the leadership of the party, but found that he, Morrison and Greenwood had been nominated. At the first ballot the voting was: Attlee 58, Morrison 44, Greenwood 32.

At the second ballot Attlee was elected by 88 votes to 44.

It might have been expected that, as the danger of a second world war became more threatening, there would be more consultations if only on an unofficial basis, between the Prime Minister, other leading Ministers in the Conservative Government, and the leaders of the Labour Opposition. That this did not happen was due to deep divergencies between the two parties on fundamental issues. The Labour party held most strongly that 'whatever arms were required must be for the League policy'. This view was not shared by many Conservative Ministers who entertained strong fears that the continued use of sanctions against Italy, in regard to Abyssinia, would have the effect of driving Mussolini into Hitler's arms. These differences between the parties became even more acute after Mr Eden (later the Earl of Avon)



and Lord Cranborne (later the Marquess of Salisbury) had resigned from Chamberlain's Government early in 1938, following Chamberlain's decision to open conversations with Mussolini.

This fundamental divergence of view showed itself on many occasions and in many ways. It is interesting to note that in February 1936 Attlee took part in a debate on a Private Member's motion in favour of the creation of a Ministry of Defence, a speech which led to his being invited to speak at the Imperial Defence College and the Naval Staff College. The Government, however, was not prepared to go further than the appointment (made in 1936) of a Minister for Co-ordination of Defence, with a very small personal staff.

More important, perhaps, was the Government decision in April 1939 to introduce a measure of conscription, a step which was presumably taken both to show the country's determination to oppose Hitler by war if necessary, and also to facilitate recruitment for the forces on the outbreak of war. This was opposed by Attlee on behalf of the Labour Party on the grounds that it was contrary to a pledge given by Baldwin not to introduce conscription in peace-time, and that the voluntary system, which had not been fully tried, would give better results than compulsory service in peace. (In *As it happened* Attlee records that in retrospect he doubts if the refusal to support this measure was wise.)

Chamberlain informed Attlee of his intention to fly to Germany in September 1938 to see Hitler. Attlee told him that he had little faith in the venture but would not oppose it, provided Chamberlain stood firm on principle. But this, in the Labour Party's view, Chamberlain did not do. And when Chamberlain reported to the House of Commons on 3 October 1938 on his visit to Munich, Attlee, in his speech, said that 'the events of these last few days constitute one of the greatest defeats that this country and France have ever sustained'.

The outbreak of war, in 1939, thus found Government and Opposition at arm's length. Attlee was also at this date out of action through illness. After the Labour Party Conference at Southport on 29 May 1939 he had to undergo two operations for prostate, and the Labour party was led, in his absence by Arthur Greenwood. The Labour Party promised and gave the fullest support to the war effort in September 1939, but declined to enter Government at the outbreak of war, the underlying reason being lack of confidence in Chamberlain and his immediate associates.

Attlee was not able to resume his full responsibilities as leader until the late autumn of 1939. Early in 1940 he made a broadcast to the nation on the reasons which led the Labour Party, in spite of its hatred of war, to support the war against Hitlerism. In January 1940, he paid a visit to Lord Gort at his headquarters in France, and saw the defence lines. In February he went to Paris, with three Labour colleagues, to discuss matters with his French comrades. This was a depressing experience. This brings us to the Debate in Parliament in May 1940 which resulted in Chamberlain's resignation.



*The War Cabinet—Deputy Prime Minister, 1940-1945*

The debate in the House of Commons on 7 and 8 May 1940, arose specifically out of the failure of the campaign in Norway and more generally out of general criticism of the Government. Attlee, on behalf of the Labour Party, moved the rejection of the Motion for the Adjournment, and made it clear that this implied a Vote of Censure. Many Members serving in the forces attended the debate. Forty Conservative M.P.s voted with the Labour opposition, and many others abstained. The Conservative majority dropped from its normal figure of about 200 to 81.

Next day Chamberlain asked Attlee and Greenwood to come to No. 10 Downing Street. Chamberlain had with him Halifax and Churchill. Attlee told Chamberlain that he knew that the Labour Party would not consent to join a Government of which he was head. Chamberlain then asked Attlee whether the Labour Party would join a coalition of which some other person was head. Attlee replied that he thought the party would agree to do this but he arranged to send a definite answer after consulting the Labour Party Conference then in session at Bournemouth. The answer, sent on the following day, confirmed the answers which he had given at the interview, i.e. 'no' to the first question, and 'yes' to the second.

On returning to London Attlee found that Chamberlain had resigned, and that the King had sent for Churchill and asked him to form a Government, and that he (Attlee) had been asked to go to Admiralty House immediately to see Churchill, to discuss appointments in the new Government. It was agreed that there should be a War Cabinet of five—Churchill, Chamberlain, Halifax, Attlee and Greenwood. The Ministers in charge of the three Service Departments were also settled at the same meeting.

No attempt is made in this note to record all the main events in the war, or the part Attlee played in them. The only practicable course is to describe Attlee's position in the War Cabinet, the qualities which he displayed, and what he contributed to the administration. But before attempting any such general appraisal some background facts need to be set out.

The Prime Minister, particularly in the years from 1941 onwards, had to attend many important Conferences overseas, the chief of these were as follows:

The meeting with the President of the U.S.A. off the coast of Newfoundland in August 1941, when the Atlantic Charter was drawn up.

The first and second Washington Conferences in December 1941 and June 1942.

Conferences in Cairo and Moscow in August 1942.

The Casablanca Conference in January 1943.

The third Washington Conference in May 1943.

The first Quebec Conference in August 1943, followed by a visit to Washington.



The Teheran Conference in November and December 1943, preceded by a meeting in Cairo.

The second Quebec Conference in September 1944, followed by a visit to Washington.

A visit to Moscow in October 1944.

The Yalta Conference in February 1945, followed by a visit to Athens.

It was inevitable that on these occasions Attlee should remain in London in charge of the Government in Churchill's absence. Nevertheless Attlee did attend several very important Conferences. These are set out in the note on p. 35.

Secondly, while Attlee was in effect the second Minister in the Government throughout the war, by virtue of his leadership of the Labour Party, the actual post which he held was changed on several occasions.

When he joined the War Cabinet he was appointed to the office of Lord Privy Seal, and held this office until 1942.

In these years (1940-1942) Attlee was not formally appointed leader of the House, but 'as often as not' he answered questions put down to the Prime Minister, deputized for him on many occasions, and arranged the ordinary business of the House.

Early in 1942 Churchill, who on the formation of the Government had appointed Sir Stafford Cripps to be our Ambassador at Moscow, decided to appoint him to a post at home. He was appointed Lord Privy Seal and leader of the House, and a Member of the War Cabinet.

Attlee, on relinquishing the post of Lord Privy Seal, was appointed Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs. This was the first formal appointment of a Deputy Prime Minister. In effect it did little more than recognize the situation which already existed.

But later in 1942, Sir Stafford Cripps was appointed Minister of Aircraft Production, and ceased to be Leader of the House.

In 1943, Sir Kingsley Wood, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, died, and was succeeded in that post by Sir John Anderson (later Viscount Waverley) who, since 1940, had been Lord President of the Council, and as such, Chairman of a Ministerial Committee (the Lord President's Committee) charged with wide-ranging authority, under the War Cabinet, for co-ordination of civil affairs. Attlee succeeded Sir John Anderson as Lord President, continuing, of course, as Deputy Prime Minister, until the Coalition Government broke up in May 1945.

Attlee was one of the Ministerial members of the Defence Committee. He also frequently attended the less formal staff conferences at which the Prime Minister and one or two other Ministers met the Chiefs of Staff for discussion of particular military matters. Attlee's interventions at these meetings were rare, but when made were always to the point.

It is right to record these changes in the duties assigned to Attlee, but they are of limited significance in any general appraisal of what Attlee contributed to the successful administration of the War Cabinet in these five tremendous years.



To outward appearances this contribution may not have been spectacular, but it was none the less vital.

A superficial commentator might point out that, since Churchill owed his appointment as Prime Minister to the decision of the Labour Party in May 1940 that they would join a Coalition, but not under Chamberlain, Churchill was under a great obligation to Attlee and his colleagues. But the matter goes far deeper than that. Churchill was well aware that the war could only be won by a Government which was determined to take whatever steps were necessary to that end, however drastic. He knew that this could only be done by a Government which had the confidence of the whole country; and that this could only be possible by a Government which included the leaders of all the political parties. He was indeed intensely proud of leading a Coalition Government which he regarded, and not without good reason, as probably the Government with the strongest support that this country had had within living memory.

One can point to the successful administration by Ministers drawn from the Labour Party of particular fields of critical importance to the war effort. The most outstanding example is perhaps Ernest Bevin's work at the Ministry of Labour charged with giving effect to manpower policy. Another is the decision that Herbert Morrison should take over the Home Office, with the responsibility for Civil Defence at the time of the blitz.

But a very large measure of the credit for the successful working of the Coalition over these five years clearly belongs to Attlee. He knew the temper of his party, and the temper of the House. It was his responsibility to see that these were represented to the Prime Minister, and played their due part in framing Government policy. All those with personal knowledge of Attlee would expect this to have been done quietly and persuasively and probably unobtrusively. It was none the worse for that.

Nor would it be right to assume that because their backgrounds were so different Churchill was without sympathy with Attlee's interest in social reform. Witness Churchill's work, many years earlier, in setting up the system of Employment Exchanges.

This was, indeed, a partnership which worked smoothly and happily for over five years, and was of the utmost value to the nation.

#### *Break-up of the Coalition. The General Election of 1945*

After the collapse of Germany the question arose of how long the Coalition Government should continue. This was linked with the question of when a General Election should be held, the Parliament elected in 1935 having been extended far beyond its normal term, owing to the impossibility of holding a general election while the War continued. For clearly a general election would be impossible while the Coalition Government remained in office.

Some hoped that the Coalition would continue until Japan had been defeated; and that before Parliament was dissolved effect would be given to



certain schemes for social reform, worked out by the Coalition Government (and in particular the recommendations contained in the Beveridge Report).

The Labour Party favoured the continuance of the Coalition Government until the autumn of 1945. But this view was not acceptable to the Conservative Ministers in the Coalition.

In consequence the Labour Ministers resigned their offices in May 1945, and a 'Caretaker' Conservative Government was formed by Churchill.

The General Election was held in the summer of 1945. Parliament was prorogued on 15 June. Nomination day was 25 June, and polling took place on 5 July. Attlee carried out a strenuous election tour of the country. Notwithstanding certain embarrassments caused by the election of Harold Laski as Chairman of the Labour Party Executive, the Labour campaign was effective. In the course of the campaign Churchill attacked the Labour Party, on the grounds that their return to power would endanger the rights of individuals. To this Attlee made a dignified and effective reply.

The results of the General Election were not announced until 25 July. On 15 July, ten days after voting had taken place, the Potsdam Conference was opened for discussions between the leaders of the British, U.S. and Russian Governments.

In the special circumstances Churchill invited Attlee to accompany him to the Conference. The idea that the leaders of the two main political parties who had just taken part in a strongly contested election should work happily together on the British delegation, was something that the leaders of the Russian delegation found it difficult to understand.

On 24 July, Churchill, Eden and Attlee, with some of their senior advisers returned to London to hear the results of the General Election to be announced on the following day.

The Election resulted in the return of 392 Labour, 213 Conservative, and 12 Liberal M.P.s (and about 20 'others').

Churchill resigned that evening and the King sent for Attlee and asked him to form a Government.

### *Prime Minister, 1945-51*

#### *Winding up the Potsdam Conference*

Attlee's first task after winning the election was to return to Potsdam where the U.S. and Russian delegations (headed by Truman and Stalin) awaited the return of the British Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary. Attlee accordingly appointed only a nucleus of six senior Ministers, and returned immediately to Potsdam with Ernest Bevin who had been appointed Foreign Secretary. (Neither the outgoing Prime Minister nor the outgoing Foreign Secretary wished to return to Potsdam.)

The results of the Potsdam Conference were not regarded as satisfactory either at the time, or later on. Many of the Russian demands were felt to be excessive. But the results of the Conference cannot be judged without taking



into account many events and circumstances, including what had taken place at the Yalta Conference in February 1945.

### *The Cabinet in 1945*

Immediately on his return from Potsdam Attlee completed the appointments to his Government. This was a strong Government, stronger than any previous Labour administration. Attlee had at his disposal a number of Ministers of great ability, and considerable experience. The leading posts in 1945 were held by Ernest Bevin (Foreign Secretary), Herbert Morrison (Lord President and Leader of the House of Commons), Arthur Greenwood (Lord Privy Seal), Hugh Dalton (Chancellor of the Exchequer), Stafford Cripps (Board of Trade), Lord Addison (Secretary of State for Dominions and Leader in the Lords), Lord Jowitt (Lord Chancellor), Aneurin Bevan (Ministry of Health), Tom Williams (Ministry of Agriculture), Chuter Ede (Home Office). Attlee himself followed Churchill's example in becoming Minister of Defence; the three Service Ministers were A. V. Alexander (Admiralty), Jack Lawson (War Office) and Lord Stansgate (Air). Moreover, most of the senior Ministers had been working together as colleagues in the Churchill administration during the last five years, and were familiar with the ways of Government.

Attlee's Cabinet as set up in 1945 numbered 20, i.e. about double the size of the War Cabinet in the later years of the war, but slightly smaller than most Cabinets in the immediate pre-war years, which had often numbered over 20.

With the passing of the Ministry of Defence Act, 1946 (see p. 30), a single Minister of Defence replaced in the Cabinet the First Lord of the Admiralty, the Secretary of State for War, and the Secretary of State for Air, with a consequent reduction in the size of the Cabinet.

This note will only mention as necessary the major changes in the holders of Ministerial offices made in the years 1945-51. But while Attlee in 1945 made full use of the experienced and older men available, he deliberately took steps from time to time to bring in younger men, and to promote them, even though this meant dispensing with the services of senior colleagues who had given long service to the Labour Party.

Space only permits of a brief summary of the events of the years 1945-51, which can best be dealt with under a few broad headings.

### *Domestic Affairs: Nationalization measures*

The Government of 1945 started with two big advantages in domestic affairs. First that there had been a very considerable degree of agreement between all parties in the Coalition Government as to certain changes which should be made after the war. Thus an Act making important changes in education had been passed into law (before the end of the war, the Minister responsible being R. A. Butler). The Beveridge Report had also outlined a scheme for reform and enlargement of the social services. Secondly, the



Labour Government were clearly united in the view that the sort of society which they wished to bring about made it necessary to place certain parts of the country's economic system under public ownership and control.

This led to the introduction into Parliament and the passing into law of a big programme of nationalization bills, most of them complicated and difficult, viz.:

Bank of England Act, 1946 (an exception to the others, being a very short Act).

Coal Industry Nationalization Act, 1946.

National Health Act (passed in 1946 but the National Health Service not inaugurated until 1948).

Transport Act, 1947.

Electricity Act, 1947.

Gas Act, 1948.

Iron and Steel Act, 1950.

This large programme of nationalization measures put a considerable strain on the administration and took up much parliamentary time. But most of these measures did not arouse strong opposition in Parliament. The exception was the Iron and Steel Bill, which it was clear would not be passed into law without recourse to the Parliament Bill of 1911 which laid down that any measure rejected by the Lords would nevertheless become law if passed by the Commons in three successive sessions. In November 1947 a bill was introduced to substitute two successive sessions for the three successive sessions laid down in the Act of 1911. This bill was twice rejected by the Lords but passed into law in July 1949. This enabled the Iron and Steel Act to become law in October 1950.

### *Economic and financial affairs*

In the latter years of the war, when the whole of the nation's activities had been directed to winning the war, the country had of course sacrificed most of its export trade; and our economy was only kept afloat by massive aid from the U.S.A. under the Lend-Lease Acts.

It was therefore a great blow when on 24 August 1945 President Truman announced that the benefits to this country of Lend-Lease would be brought to an end, before there had been time to demobilise our forces or to redeploy our manpower and industrial resources to a peace-time basis. This situation could only be met by a U.S. loan. But the arrangements for the loan unfortunately included provisions, as to the convertibility of sterling insisted on by the U.S. Government which proved to be far too optimistic.

Before the end of the war, the Coalition Government had in 1944 accepted that one of the primary aims and responsibilities of the Government was the maintenance of a high and stable level of employment.

At the end of the war the whole of our economy was of course subject to very extensive controls, to ensure that all our efforts were directed to winning the war. Clearly these controls could not be brought to a sudden end, but



could only be phased out gradually. The Labour Government's policy of Economic Planning was set out in the Economic Survey for 1947. Very briefly it aimed at developing a system whereby national resources could be assessed, national needs formulated, and methods devised which would enable the Government to influence resources in the desired direction without interfering with democratic freedoms.

This links up with the appointment in 1947, for the first time, of a Minister for Economic Affairs (Sir Stafford Cripps) who shortly afterwards became Chancellor of the Exchequer (on Dalton's resignation) while retaining his duties of Economic Co-ordination.

### *Defence: Atomic energy*

The collapse of Japan—after the atomic attack on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945—made it possible to start demobilization far sooner than had been expected. Although British scientists had played a great part in the development of atomic energy, owing to war conditions the work of development had been carried out in the U.S.A.

An agreement had been reached between Great Britain, the U.S.A. and Canada, at the Quebec Conference in September 1944 about partnership in Atomic Energy matters.

The agreement, however, needed clarification, and there were points which called for discussion between representatives of the three countries. During the war Sir John Anderson had been the Minister charged with handling this matter, and he agreed at Attlee's request to continue to give his interest and help in this matter in a personal capacity.

In November 1945 Attlee accompanied by Anderson flew to Washington. He stayed at the White House, had talks with President Truman and Mackenzie King on atomic matters. An agreement which Attlee and Anderson regarded as satisfactory was reached; but later on the passing by Congress of the MacMahon Act led to further difficulties.

Attlee is also entitled to credit for the prompt and effective steps taken at this date to set up the organization which later became the Atomic Energy Authority.

On this visit Attlee, while in Washington, addressed the House of Congress. He also visited Ottawa, where he also addressed both Houses of Parliament.

Churchill on becoming Prime Minister in May 1940, had assumed the duties of Minister of Defence. This step had no statutory authority. Constitutionally he carried out these duties as part of the exercise of his functions as Prime Minister.

Attlee in 1945 followed Churchill's example. In time of war this was both a necessary and an adequate arrangement. But many of those who had long experience of defence matters were convinced that the time had come when



both a Minister and a Ministry of Defence should be established as part of our permanent defence organization, and given statutory powers. This advice coincided with the views which Attlee had long held, and in 1946 the Ministry of Defence Act was passed. Attlee thereupon ceased to be Minister of Defence and A. V. Alexander was appointed in his place.

*The Commonwealth and foreign affairs*

Some of the most striking events in Attlee's premiership concerned the countries of the Commonwealth and foreign affairs.

*India.* During the war much thought was given to the means by which India might achieve the full self-government which had long been the declared aim of the British Government. A mission had been sent out under Sir Stafford Cripps in 1942 to propound a scheme for a constituent assembly at which India might determine its future. But it had proved impossible to secure agreement.

In 1946 a further Cabinet Mission was sent out (Sir Stafford Cripps, Lord Pethick-Lawrence and A. V. Alexander). This mission also failed to find any solution which would overcome the communal difficulties. The possibility of dividing India into two States was discussed.

The situation was made more difficult by the steadily declining British element in the Indian Civil Service, recruitment having been suspended during the war. Moreover, the administration had been weakened by the prospect of British withdrawal and by the increase in communal disorder.

Attlee was forced to the conclusion that discussion between the leaders of the Moslem and Hindu communities would never result in agreement. He was convinced that the Indian leaders must be faced with a time limit after which they would themselves have to accept responsibility. It was also clear to him that only a man of intense vigour and imagination could carry through the change-over. After much thought he decided to ask Lord Mountbatten to undertake this immensely difficult operation in succession to Lord Wavell. Lord Mountbatten accepted and was appointed Viceroy in March 1947. The India Independence Bill was passed through both Houses of Parliament without a division, and India and Pakistan became independent members of the British Commonwealth on 15 August 1947.

Unfortunately the setting up of the two new States was accompanied by much rioting. Many thousands of lives were lost, and great numbers were driven from their homes.

Against this it should be recorded that both India and Pakistan, notwithstanding the difficulties encountered in the early years of their independence, showed great gratitude and friendliness to this country. Attlee's tenacity of purpose, and refusal to be deflected from the course of action on which he had decided, were never more clearly shown than in this matter.

Burma, which had been separated from India as a result of one of the



recommendations of the Simon Commission, was likewise granted its independence in January 1948.

These events had their effect on certain of the Colonies, and in the Gold Coast and Nigeria, to mention two outstanding instances, considerable advances were made towards self-government.

*Foreign affairs.* Attlee recognized to the full the inter-relationship between foreign affairs, defence and economic and domestic issues. But as Ernest Bevin was, of all his colleagues, the one with whom he had the closest sympathy, and whom he saw most frequently, there is perhaps less in this field which bears the impress of Attlee's personality. He was of course a strong believer in the various steps taken to strengthen the western democracies and bring them more closely together.

The blockade of Western Berlin by the Russians deserves a mention, if only because in March 1949 Attlee flew to Berlin to witness himself the airlift by which British and American Air Forces were defeating the blockade.

The first three and a half years of the Labour Government returned to power in July 1945 were thus years of considerable achievement. But from about the end of 1948 the Government was faced with increasing difficulties.

In foreign affairs serious difficulties were encountered in the Middle East. There were many outstanding questions with Egypt. The British Government offered to withdraw their troops from the Citadel in Cairo. But the Egyptian claims to sovereignty over the Sudan were not acceptable: and this made it impossible to reach agreement with the Egyptian Government.

The greatest difficulties arose in Palestine. Long discussions and negotiations took place over the rival claims of Jews and Arabs. Several schemes of partition were put forward. No acceptable solution could be found, and the growing unrest and tensions throughout the country rendered impossible the position of British authority, and the supporting troops, who were attacked by both sides and suffered heavy casualties. In the end it was decided that British troops and British authority should be withdrawn, and the two sides left to fight it out.

The task of re-establishing our financial and economic position, after the enormous dislocation caused by the war years, also proved to be a far longer and heavier task than had been anticipated. These difficulties were accentuated by world-wide conditions and by a recession in the U.S.A. in 1949. Sterling was devalued on 18 September 1949, an action which affected the personal prestige of the Chancellor of the Exchequer (Sir Stafford Cripps) whose health was already somewhat impaired, and perhaps led to some weakening of the administration.



*The General Election of February 1950**The Labour Government, February 1950 to October 1951*

The full 5-year term of the Parliament elected after the Second World War, expired in July 1950. Attlee decided not to wait until that date, but recommended the King to dissolve Parliament and hold an election in February 1950. Although the Labour Government had not lost a by-election since the 1945 election, they lost a large number of seats at the General Election, partly perhaps owing to the fact that there were no fewer than 478 Liberal candidates.

Attlee's seat at Limehouse had ceased to exist under a redistribution of constituencies. Instead he stood for West Walthamstow, and was returned by a large majority. As usual he left his constituency until the last few days of the election and carried out a big tour in the Midlands and North of England.

The final results gave the Labour Party an overall majority of 10: there were 9 Liberals, and 2 Irish Nationalists.

Only one senior Minister (Creech Jones) lost his seat. But the health of two of the most important members of the administration—Bevin and Cripps—was far from good. Cripps, although not in good health, introduced the Budget of 1950 and saw the Finance Bill passed into law. But in October 1950, needing at least a year's rest, he resigned and Hugh Gaitskell succeeded him as Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Foreign affairs continued to present difficult issues.

At the end of 1950 North Korea attacked South Korea. As Bevin's health did not permit him to fly, Attlee flew to Washington to explain to the U.S. authorities the British position, and our anxiety that steps should be taken to limit the war in the Far East. He also visited Canada before returning to London.

In February 1951 the Iran Government under the government headed by Musadiq, demanded the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, but would not agree to any satisfactory terms for compensation. The refinery at Abadan was occupied by Iranian forces. The Government decided against sending an expeditionary force and withdrew the British personnel. (A settlement of this matter which preserved some British interest alongside those of certain oil companies of other nations, was reached some years later.)

Bevin resigned as Foreign Secretary in March 1951 (although he remained a member of the Government until his death later in the year) and was succeeded as Foreign Secretary by Herbert Morrison.

Difficulties also occurred in domestic affairs.

Attlee himself had a bout of ill-health in 1951, and had to go into hospital for some weeks. During his absence, differences between his colleagues came to a head over certain National Health charges and this resulted in the resignation of Aneurin Bevan and two other Ministers (Harold Wilson and John Freeman).

The strain of carrying on the Government over a prolonged period with a



very small majority was very great; and bearing in mind that the King and Queen were due to visit Australia and New Zealand in the spring of 1952, Attlee advised the King to dissolve Parliament in the autumn of 1951. At the election held in October 1951, Labour lost nineteen seats, which gave the Conservatives a majority. Attlee at once resigned.

Looking at the six years of Labour Government from 1945-1951, it is clear that in, say, the last two years, more acute difficulties had to be faced, and less was achieved than in the earlier years. But it is fair to point out that in these later years, the Labour Government was suffering from the illness of some leading Ministers, and perhaps from the exhaustion of others after over ten continuous years in office. After the 1950 election they had to contend with the harassments inseparable from a very small majority in the Commons. Again in their first four years of office after the 1945 election, they were fully occupied in passing a heavy programme of legislation on which the Party was in full agreement. But when this programme had been passed into law there was not the same degree of unanimity as to the priorities for further action.

In October 1951 Attlee thus once more became leader of the Opposition, and continued as such until 1955. He resigned on 7 December 1955, being on the same day created Earl Attlee.

A chronicle of his later years would testify to much public work, and to important functions carried through with his accustomed dignity and sincerity. But these years are of less importance than those summarized in this Memoir.

Attlee married in 1922 Violet Helen, daughter of H. E. Millar, of Heathdown, Hampstead. They had one son and three daughters. Lady Attlee, who was Earl Attlee's constant companion on his political tours, died on 7 June 1964.

Earl Attlee died on 8 October 1967. His ashes were interred in Westminster Abbey on 7 November 1967.

#### *Attlee's career seen as a whole*

It would not be right to conclude this biographical note without some attempt to portray the character and qualities of the man who had such a remarkable career.

Before dealing with the qualities which he showed in his public life, it is right to say how much his family life meant to him. He did not allow the preoccupations of a busy official life to prevent him from continuing to enjoy the quiet unostentatious family home life in which he had himself been brought up. Indeed during the years when he was Prime Minister, his family life continued on the same lines as before, during the week in the family flat in the upper floors of No. 10, and during the week-ends at Chequers. This was perhaps connected with his power of relaxing completely, when he had completed his official work.

Unlike many public figures, his whole life seems all of a piece: in that each stage was the natural consequence of what had gone before.



His entry into public life was not premeditated and owed nothing to personal ambition. It followed almost inevitably from the strong socialist convictions which he had acquired during the 9 years when he did social work in East London before the First World War. For it was the experience which he had gained in this work which led first to his taking a part in local government, and then to his standing for Parliament.

There is nothing to suggest that Attlee ever took any step himself to advance his claims in the progress which led to his eventual appointment to be the leader of the Labour Party. Indeed it is clear that the initiative in putting his name forward always came from others.

Perhaps even more significant is the attitude which he adopted on two occasions when suggestions were made that some other person should take over the leadership from him. One such occasion was after the 1945 election, when he showed his magnanimity in the way in which he was not deterred from appointing to Cabinet posts some of those who had shown that they would have preferred another leader.

Perhaps the most striking example was when Stafford Cripps in 1947 let it be known that he thought that Attlee and Bevin should change places, Bevin becoming Prime Minister and Attlee Foreign Secretary. Attlee dealt with this by finding out how Bevin viewed this suggestion. Bevin rejected it with scorn, and nothing more was heard of the proposal. Attlee himself remained entirely unperturbed by this move. His relations with Cripps continued as friendly and harmonious as ever, and shortly afterwards he appointed Cripps to be Minister for Economic Affairs, and then also Chancellor of the Exchequer.

No man who has held high office for so long was ever more completely free from any sense of personal self-importance or from any wish to be treated with exaggerated respect. He was always easily approachable by his colleagues or by those who worked for him. If one wanted to bring some point to his attention, or to seek his instructions orally, it was never necessary to spend time thinking out the best or most tactful way to put the point. One could put the point briefly and bluntly: and either one got an immediate answer, or one would be told that he would think it over—in which case the answer came in a day or so.

But Attlee's unselfishness and quiet manners, his absence of self-importance, did not prevent him from being a very effective holder of the office of Prime Minister. A leading article in the *Ottawa Journal* at the date of his resignation as Prime Minister described him as not only 'in important ways a great Prime Minister', but 'in many ways a beau ideal of Prime Ministers'.

The strength of his position as Prime Minister arose, as I see it, from a rare combination of qualities. First, he had of course worked in many fields of Government, and on many subjects could draw on his own experience.

More important than that, everyone recognized his unselfishness and integrity and knew that whatever he said in his simple undramatic way, for he never wasted words, was said with conviction.



Then again, he knew how to get the best out of his colleagues, and left them to get on with their work, only intervening when necessary.

But he combined this with a capacity to keep in touch not only with his colleagues in the Government, but also with opinion in the party generally. And so it came about that when he did intervene, what he said was looked upon, not merely as his own personal view, but as a conclusion reached after much thought and consultation, which would be accepted even in the most difficult and controversial issues.

Looked at in this way, it is surely fair to conclude by saying that Attlee, when Prime Minister, based himself most successfully on the well-tried doctrine that the Prime Minister, in Cabinet, was the first among equals.

BRIDGES

#### NOTE ON ATTLEE'S VISITS OVERSEAS WHILE HE WAS A MEMBER OF THE WAR CABINET

*31 May 1940.* Attlee accompanied the Prime Minister, C.I.G.S. and General Ismay on a visit to Paris and met the French Prime Minister (Paul Reynaud) who had with him Marshal Pétain, Admiral Darlan, Général Weygand and Général de Gaulle, shortly before the fall of France.

*October 1941.* Attlee led the British delegation to the International Labour Conference in New York. On this visit he also flew to Washington, stayed at the Embassy and met President Roosevelt.

He also visited Ottawa, was entertained by Mackenzie King and addressed the Canadian House of Commons.

*In September 1942.* When Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs he visited Newfoundland, and again went to Ottawa.

*In August 1944* he paid a long visit to the Italian theatre of war and Algeria. Later in the same month he visited the Western Front.

*In May 1945* he went as one of the British Delegation to San Francisco to take part in the founding of the United Nations.

#### HONOURS AND AWARDS

Companion of Honour, 1945.

Order of Merit, 1951.

Created Earl Attlee, 1955.

Knight of the Garter, 1956.

#### HONORARY DEGREES AND FELLOWSHIPS

Hon. D.C.L., Oxford.

Hon. LL.D., Cambridge, London, Wales, Glasgow, Nottingham, Aberdeen, Madras, Hull, Bristol and Ceylon.



Hon. D.Litt., Reading.

Honorary Fellow, University College, Oxford; Queen Mary College, London;  
London School of Economics.

Honorary Fellow of R.I.B.A.

#### OTHER AWARDS AND DISTINCTIONS

Freeman and Liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Innholders.

Honorary Bencher (Inner Temple).

President (1961) of the Association of Municipal Corporations.

Knight of the Order of St John.

Honorary Freeman of the City of London.

Freeman of Cities of Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester, Oxford, Aberdeen  
and Bristol, also Freeman of several boroughs.

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