

Leadership and Change: Prime Ministers in the Post-War World - Alec Douglas-Home Transcript

Date: Thursday, 24 May 2007 - 12:00AM

PRIME MINISTERS IN THE POST-WAR WORLD: ALEC DOUGLAS-HOME

D.R. Thorpe

After Andrew Bonar Law's funeral in Westminster Abbey in November 1923, Herbert Asquith observed, 'It is fitting that we should have buried the Unknown Prime Minister by the side of the Unknown Soldier'. Asquith owed Bonar Law no posthumous favours, and intended no ironic compliment, but the remark was a serious under-estimate. In post-war politics Alec Douglas-Home is often seen as the Bonar Law of his times, bracketed with his fellow Scot as an interim figure in the history of Downing Street between longer serving Premiers; in Bonar Law's case, Lloyd George and Stanley Baldwin, in Home's, Harold Macmillan and Harold Wilson. Both Law and Home were certainly 'unexpected' Prime Ministers, but both were also 'under-estimated' and they made lasting beneficial changes to the political system, both on a national and a party level. The unexpectedness of their accessions to the top of the greasy pole, and the brevity of their Premiership (they were the two shortest of the 20th century, Bonar Law's one day short of seven months, Alec Douglas-Home's two days short of a year), are not an accurate indication of their respective significance, even if the precise details of their careers were not always accurately recalled, even by their admirers. The Westminster village is often another world to the general public. Stanley Baldwin was once accosted on a train from Chequers to London, at the height of his fame, by a former school friend. 'It's Baldwin, isn't it?', he asked. 'Harrow, '84?' Baldwin paused in his perusal of The Times crossword and confirmed the details. His friend leant forward. 'And what are you doing now?' The equivalent moment for Alec Douglas-Home came in retirement travelling back to Berwick-upon-Tweed, when he was engaged in conversation in a railway carriage by an elderly couple. 'My husband and I think it was a great tragedy that you were never Prime Minister', said the lady, as they parted. 'As a matter of fact I was', replied Home, with his customary politeness, adding, 'but only for a very short time.'

Home owed the possibility of that very short time indirectly to Tony Benn, erstwhile the Second Viscount Stansgate. Following Benn's determined campaign in the early 1960s for the right to renounce his title, the Peerage Act came on to the Statute Book on 31 July 1963. In January 1963 the Government had promised that the Bill should 'become law in time to take practical effect at, but not before, the next General Election.' But this did not satisfy supporters of the Bill. Further discussion led to the Lords' declaration on 8 May 1963 that 'Surrender should not extinguish the peerage itself' (a crucial factor for Home). The Opposition amendment of 16 July 1963, proposed by Lord Silkin, some think with the encouragement of Lord Salisbury, astute kingmaker, which the Lords endorsed by 105 votes to 25, was that the Act should become operative on receiving the Royal Assent. This followed a fortnight later. Existing hereditary peers now had a window of twelve months in which to disclaim their Peerages if they so wished. The second Viscount Stansgate disclaimed his at once.

As the leadership of the Conservative Party was increasingly a matter of speculation in the summer of 1963, this Act, and the date of its implementation, subtly altered the ground rules. Both Lord Hailsham and Lord Home, who had discussed the matter in May 1963, were theoretically potential future candidates, if they so wished, but only it seemed after the next election, when the matter would have been resolved one way or another without their participation. One of the myths of this time is that the Profumo affair shortened Macmillan's Premiership. In fact, it did precisely the opposite. In the summer of 1963 Macmillan had been seriously thinking of stepping down, in which case his successor would almost certainly have been Reginald Maudling, then on a political high. The Profumo Affair removed that possibility. It would have been seen as an admission of failure by Macmillan to have gone in the midst of that furore. Macmillan decided to stay on and to fight the next election. Only his prostate condition in October - 'the hand of fate' as Macmillan called it - led him to resign, almost welcoming by then the opportunity of a way out.

At this moment, thanks to the amended Peerage Act, Hailsham and Home were now papabile - and without the years of scrutiny that had attended figures such as Rab Butler, Reginald Maudling or Edward Heath, though at that stage only Hailsham was considered a possibility for a future disclaimer. Although Home and Hailsham were senior figures, they were fresh faces in this particular race. 'Enter Mr Hogg and Mr Home', as Anthony Howard put it in the New Statesman, an article which concentrated Home's mind on the options.

The subsequent Conservative Leadership contest in October 1963 is still surrounded by many inaccurate myths. Suffice it to quote Professor Vernon Bogdanor, 'The outcome, the selection of Lord Home, cannot be said seriously to have misrepresented Conservative opinion at the time.' Criticism of the Queen too is unfounded. To quote Professor Bogdanor again, 'If the Conservative Party was divided, as it clearly was, the Queen could only compromise the position of the monarchy if she were to take part in that conflict.' The point that is often overlooked is that not only was Rab Butler not going to get the leadership, but he knew that himself, which is why he dreaded the moment of Macmillan's retirement. John Morrison, Chairman of the 1922 Committee, had told Butler in the summer of 1963 that 'the chaps won't have you', and when that autumn Butler met Maudling by chance in the street outside Maudling's Hans Place apartment, he said to

him in the course of the conversation, 'Of course, I'll be very pleased to serve under you Reggie, when the time comes.' Hailsham's candidature was ended by the Americans, who let it be known through the British Ambassador in Washington, Lord Harlech, that Lord Hailsham as Prime Minister would be the end of the special relationship. The two serious candidates by October were Home and Maudling, and after a trawl of the whole party inside and outside Parliament Home was given what was in essence the 'first option'.

Crucially, Lord Home did not kiss hands when he was called to the Palace, but agreed to see first if he was able to form a government. The acceptance of the Foreign Office by Butler, the central figure, established Home as Prime Minister. So Rab Butler, mindful of Peel and the split over the Corn Laws in the 1840s, made Home Prime Minister, not Harold Macmillan. By then there was no point in Hailsham, or Maudling being 'plus royal que le roi', and in Lord Beaverbrook's vivid phrase, 'Home had the loaves and the fishes'. When Home asked Maudling to stay on in the Treasury, he also told him that if he (Home) was unable to form a Government, then Maudling would be the politician the Queen would then invite to try to form an administration. Although Iain Macleod and Enoch Powell declined to serve, Home was able to form a government without them.

If Home's entry into Downing Street was unusual - the nearest parallel was Queen Victoria's invitation to Lord Hartington in 1880 to try to form a government - the first few weeks were constitutionally unprecedented, as for a short time after Home had disclaimed his title to seek election in the by-election at Kinross and West Perthshire, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom was a member of neither House of Parliament, a position to be repeated, regarding the Foreign Secretaryship, between October 1964 and January 1965, after Patrick Gordon-Walker had lost his seat at Smethwick at the General Election. Home ensured then that the Conservatives did not make political capital of this constitutional anomaly, as, in a way unimaginable today, Labour had let the matter take its natural course when he was seeking election to the Commons.

Home had a difficult legacy. The Conservatives had been in office for twelve years and third term governments, rare phenomena in any case, are by their very nature often unpopular, as Tony Blair has recently admitted. Although the Conservatives still had a comfortable majority from their 1959 General Election victory, despite some dramatic by-election losses, there was an atmosphere of damage limitation. Home faced in Harold Wilson, a formidable Leader of the Opposition, a figure wholly in tune with the *Zeitgeist* of the age. An election was due within a year, and few expected many fresh initiatives. They were to be proved wrong. From his first day in Downing Street Home concentrated on putting the Conservatives in a position to win what would then have been an unprecedented fourth term. In the event he failed by the narrowest of margins, a few hundred votes judiciously redistributed in the most marginal seats would have altered the overall result. The Conservatives were 11 percentage points behind Labour when Alec Home became Prime Minister; twelve months later they suffered defeat by only 0.7 per cent, indeed the Labour share of the vote (at 44.1 per cent) was only 0.3 per cent higher than in October 1959 when they had lost by 100 seats.

Home's Cabinet contained a blend of experienced figures and the leading politicians of the next generation. But it was not a Cabinet that was always at ease with itself. The events of October 1963 cast a long shadow and there was a sense of jostling for post-election positions, probably in Opposition. Rab Butler became Foreign Secretary, the post he had wanted in 1957, and which made him then only the second politician after Sir John Simon to have held all three of the great offices of state below the Premiership. But the appointment was not the one by which his career will be remembered. He was moving into the political arena where the Prime Minister had acknowledged expertise, and in which he had relatively little experience, apart from his unhappy pre-war spell as Under Secretary at the time of Munich, a point he acknowledged in his first major speech in the Commons as Foreign Secretary. 'I know that I shall greatly profit by the Prime Minister's own experience and great skill as Foreign Secretary in conducting my own duties as Foreign Secretary in succession to him.' Butler, his spirit crushed by three failures to become Prime Minister, in 1953 (with hindsight Butler thought this his best opportunity), 1957 and 1963, was de-mob happy, and even more prone to his famous Rabbisms. 'Mind you, Alec's an awfully good man, really', he would say at meetings. And when he visited Moscow University on his Russian tour, he amazed his hosts by asking through the interpreter, 'Is this university state-aided?' More seriously, just before the election in October Butler told a reporter that 'things might start slipping in the last few days', adding, inaccurately as it proved, 'they won't slip towards us.' When Home published in retirement what proved a bestselling political memoir, Butler offered it to weekend guests at his home at Stanstead, asking if they would care 'to look at this book on fishing.'

Maudling continued as Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Henry Brooke as Home Secretary. Hailsham was Lord President and later, in addition, in charge of Education and Science. Duncan Sandys, Peter Thorneycroft, Freddie Erroll and Geoffrey Rippon were also prominent figures. Two of the key figures were in non-departmental jobs. Selwyn Lloyd, the most loyal of the loyal, was recalled to the Cabinet as Leader of the House and Lord Privy Seal (he had been the principal victim of Macmillan's Night of the Long Knives in July 1962), and provided Home with not only support and encouragement, but also the riposte about Harold Wilson being 'the 14th Mr Wilson'. John Hare, now Viscount Blakenham, was Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and Party Chairman. Blakenham was the principal advocate of an early election, so much so that he was dubbed 'the March Hare'. Home, rightly, decided to follow Harold Macmillan's advice and play it as long as possible constitutionally, even into November. (He later regretted not going to the country even later than 15 October.) But the key figure in terms of the legacy the Home government would leave was in fact

the man destined to be Home's successor as Party Leader, Edward Heath, the President of the Board of Trade.

With his combination of reforming zeal and determination to modernise, Heath had published a bill in January 1964 to abolish resale price maintenance. Its effects can be seen today in the cut price stickers on the piles of books in any high street Waterstone's. The free market concept was an ideal banner for the Conservative modernisers, but it threatened the livelihood of many small shopkeepers. A vociferous campaign, orchestrated by the Daily Express, fuelled sectional protests and a back bench rebellion. On 11 March 1964, 21 Conservatives voted against Heath's bill and 17 others abstained. In a later division the government had a majority of only one. The issue was at the heart of the old tensions between free traders and protectionists in the Conservative Party. Modernisers saw a system that legitimised an anti-competitive structure, at levels fixed by the manufacturers of branded goods, as incompatible with the radical business restructuring needed for Britain's trading survival. Caution was urged by those who had the interests of the traditionally Tory shopkeepers in mind. Home, who believed industrial modernisation was vital, backed Heath, even though the Cabinet, as they had been in 1959 when the issue had last been raised, were divided. 'The government had committed themselves to a policy of modernising Britain and promoting a more efficient user of resources', Home told the Cabinet on 14 January 1964. 'This policy would fail to carry conviction if they were to tolerate the continuance of a practice so manifestly at variance with it.' After much controversy and backbench revolts, the Bill passed its third reading on 13 May. The main impact of the abolition was positive. It showed that the government had not run out of new ideas and was not prepared to have economic policy dictated by vested interest groups, even if these were traditional Conservative supporters, and as such it was the harbinger of even more decisive changes in the future. Many Tories feared that the whole issue would be electorally disadvantageous, but this proved statistically unfounded. 'Once past the House of Commons', David Butler and Anthony King concluded in their book on the 1964 Election, 'the bill aroused little further controversy, and resale price maintenance figured hardly at all at the election.' Another example of Home's decisiveness was his tough stance on trade unions, giving no legislative help over the *Rookes v Barnard* case in January 1964, when the House of Lords upheld the right of a BOAC employee at Heathrow Airport to damages for unfair dismissal because of a closed shop policy by the Association of Engineering and Shipbuilding Draughtsmen. He also made regulation 6 of the 1920 Emergency Powers Act a permanent legislative tool, ironically to prove a great help to Harold Wilson during the 1966 seamen's strike.

Within a few weeks of entering Downing Street, Home had to co-ordinate the British response to the news of President Kennedy's assassination. There were no indications that 22 November would prove such a dramatic and tragic day. Home had been in the morning to the TUC headquarters to view and discuss an education presentation, and he followed this with talks on Northern Ireland with the province's Premier, Captain Terence O'Neill. At 5.15 he was then driven to Arundel Castle, with his wife Elizabeth, for his first weekend break since taking office. He was met at Arundel Castle by the breathless Duke of Norfolk, who informed him of the breaking news from Dallas. The BBC were already in contact with Arundel Castle, and after a hurried supper Home was driven back to London to the BBC's Lime Grove studios, where his speech on behalf of the British nation was simple and dignified, unlike that of George Brown, the Deputy Labour leader, who in the words of one of his civil servants, 'declined in efficiency as the day progressed.' It was the moment when Home really established himself as the public face of the nation, as became clear from correspondents from many parts of the country, and not all by any means Conservative voters.

Home met the new American President Lyndon B. Johnson after Kennedy's funeral, but his first substantive talks with the new American President came in a visit to Washington in February 1964. Johnson, the Texas bruiser, was rather wary of the new British Premier, as he was for Johnson such an unknown quantity. The Beatles were taking America by storm at the time and Johnson attempted humour initially. 'I like your advance guard', he quipped. 'But don't you think they need haircuts?' If Johnson thought that Home would be a pushover in talks - especially, for him, on the contentious issue of the sale of British Leyland buses to Cuba - he had a rude awakening. Harold Macmillan had famously described Home to the Queen as 'steel painted as wood', and this certainly became clear in Washington that week. 'There is no question of dictation by the United States Government to this country over commercial relations with Cuba', said Home. 'This is a subject which is decided solely by the British Government.' And so it was, to Johnson's undisguised fury. When Butler was in Washington two months later, the matter still rankled, and Johnson waved a wad of dollar notes at Butler, saying that if Britain was so hard up that she needed to trade with Cuba, he could pay for the cancelled order himself. But the deal was concluded. Home showed similar steel in his second spell at the Foreign Office with Andrei Gromyko - the abominable no-man - over the expulsion from Britain of 105 Russian spies.

At the forefront of Home's mind was always a possible post-election fourth term. He saw no reason why this should not be achieved and ordered the Cabinet to conduct business on the expectation that they would be returned to office. During the course of his year in Downing Street he promised Christopher Soames, then the Agriculture Minister, the reversion to the Foreign Secretaryship if the Conservatives won. Enoch Powell was pencilled in to return to the Cabinet with a brief to reform Whitehall. No plans were made to recall Iain Macleod, certainly not after the Spectator affair in January 1964, an episode that in Home's view tipped the balance against the Conservatives in October 1964.

In January 1964 Randolph Churchill published The Fight for the Tory Leadership, an insider's account, with material from Harold Macmillan, of the previous autumn's political upheavals. Iain Macleod, by now editor of the Spectator, in addition to his backbench responsibilities, was outraged. On 17 January he published a review under the title 'The Tory Leadership', describing the book as 'Mr Macmillan's trailer for the screen play of his memoirs.' But the phrase that went at once into the political lexicon was that about the supposed 'magic circle' of Old Etonians who had conspired to make one of their own Conservative leader, over and above better qualified candidates, notably Butler, Macleod's candidate. Alec Home was deeply saddened by the ensuing row, which raked up all the controversies of October 1963, not for his own feelings or reputation but because of what he considered the irreparable damage to the Conservative Party's chances in the next election. Macleod, surprisingly for one with sharp political antennae, did not anticipate the furore he would cause. 'He was not forgiven', The Times wrote on his premature death in 1970. 'It was a political failing on his part that he took so long to appreciate that he had disqualified himself for the highest office.' Home took advice from Harold Macmillan on what he should say if Macleod persisted in his attacks, notably the point that the Conservative Party had not been able to find a leader from within its own ranks in the Commons. Macmillan advised Home to say that it was a sad reflection on journalism that the profession had not been able to find an editor of the Spectator from within its own ranks, but had had to resort to Iain Macleod.

The Macleod article came at exactly the wrong moment (when would have been the right one?), as the Conservatives were picking up some momentum, particularly on the domestic front. In the week of the article, Home was in South Wales on a pre-election tour, when statistics showed that less than one family in three owned their home in 1951 when the Conservatives had come into office. Now it was nearly half. 'A property owning democracy is becoming a reality', Home said in his speech in Swansea, a reference to his mentor in pre-war days, the Unionist MP for the Scottish Universities, Noel Skelton, who had first advocated the principle in Constructive Conservatism in 1924. 'Until our educated and politically minded democracy', wrote Skelton, 'has become predominantly a property-owning democracy, neither the national equilibrium nor the balance of the life of the individual will be restored.' It was a message that was taken up by Skelton's two principal protégés, Anthony Eden and Alec Home, future Prime Ministers both. Not that it was necessary to remind Alec Home, but on the eve of the 1964 campaign, Eden, by then Earl of Avon, wrote to Home as the manifesto was being written, reiterating, 'A property-owning democracy is the aim.'

In the Cabinet room, Home proved a formidable chairman, pushing the agenda onwards, being crisp in his summings-up and shrewd in his preparation of the agenda. One of the first things he did was to cut a swathe through the ever-burgeoning number of ad hoc Cabinet Committees, many of which had now run their natural course. This reorganization was symptomatic of the pragmatic approach Home brought to his task as Cabinet Chairman. Indeed no less a distinguished mandarin than Sir Burke Trend, who was Cabinet Secretary under four Prime Ministers, believed that Alec Home was the most orderly and efficient of all in his conduct of Cabinet business. Another under-estimated change that Home introduced was the so-called Douglas-Home rules whereby the Civil Service is permitted to talk with Opposition leaders in the lead-up to a General Election, so as to expedite more efficiently changes of policy in the event of a change of government. This is now such an established part of the political procedure that it is often forgotten how relatively recently the system was introduced, and by whom.

Home was courteous and brisk with memos. Colin Cowdrey, the England cricket captain, and a notable slip fielder, wrote to him once on MCC matters as 'Sir Alec'. Home replied, 'You can drop the Sir, if you ever drop anything.' Above all, there was never any masquerading or spin by Alec Home. What you saw was what you got. Even his political opponents acknowledged that his integrity was absolute, another similarity with Bonar Law, of whom Lloyd George said, during the 1922 General Election campaign, that Law was 'honest to the point of naivety', which proved a telling advantage with the British electorate after six years of Lloyd George. Home was the embodiment of Walter Bagehot's ideal, 'Sensible men of substantial means are what we wish to be ruled by.'

Prime Ministers fall into many categories. As Prime Minister, Home may not have been an innovator, changing the political landscape, like Margaret Thatcher; or a reformer, bringing about a major change of direction in policy, like Clement Attlee. He was certainly not an egoist, living for the adrenalin of office, like Lloyd George and others. He did not change the political weather, as Churchill said of one who never even became Prime Minister, Joe Chamberlain. Home came in a different category of Prime Ministers, as a balancer chosen to bring different wings together, a role that was second nature to Stanley Baldwin or James Callaghan. Just as Bonar Law was chosen as Conservative leader because he was not Walter Long or Austen Chamberlain, so Alec Home was chosen because he was not Rab Butler or Quintin Hailsham. But like James Callaghan he was a Prime Minister who came at the tail-end of a long period of dominance by his party, a position not enviable in politics, and one that both Home and Callaghan shared with Lord Rosebery in the 1890s.

The inevitable problems faced by Rosebery, Home and Callaghan at such an unpropitious time in the electoral cycle were thus exacerbated by the perceived view that they were not destined to be in office for long. Of these three Premiers Home was by far the most successful, leaving his party best equipped to regain power, something it did less than five years after he gave up the leadership, whereas for the Liberals at the turn of the century, the process took ten years, and for the Labour Party at the end of the century eighteen years. Although the change did not take place whilst he was Prime minister, but in February 1965

in his short period as Leader of the Opposition, Home's review of the procedure for choosing the Conservative Party leader was to have a profound effect on the party, and on the executive's relationship with the Monarch at a time of vacancy. It is often claimed that this new system, which itself has undergone many changes in subsequent years, was the brain child of the back-bench MP Humphrey Berkeley. But Berkeley, with his own proposals, courteously considered by Home, was knocking at an already open door, as Berkeley himself acknowledged.

The first public surprise about Home's early days in No 10 was the extent to which he was interested in and knowledgeable about domestic affairs. For those who had experience of his time as resident Minister of State at the Scottish Office from 1951-1955 this was only to be expected. In those years, when Home travelled the length and breadth of his native country, from Cape Wrath to John O'Groats, past Bettyhill on the Northern seaboard, thorough the Highlands and Islands, as well as the great industrial conurbations, there were few domestic concerns that at some stage did not cross his desk in St Andrews House in Edinburgh. He followed a path of which Noel Skelton, who had died prematurely in 1935, would have approved. In Mull, he had talks on the reorganization of local Government, at the Turnberry Hotel in Ayrshire he met on a regular basis with the Scottish Farmers' Union to discuss their manifold problems. He worked on questions ofcrofting and depopulation in the Highlands and Islands. He had a sharp eye for administrative detail. Once a civil servant handed him a draft that spoke of proposed changes to the system of tied cottages 'by regulation'. Home, the experienced parliamentarian, swiftly changed this to 'by legislation'. The rating system, schools, transport, unemployment, health care were all problems with which he was concerned in these years. Even Home's opponents admitted his profound knowledge of Foreign Affairs, from his days at the Commonwealth Office and Foreign Office from 1955 to 1963; what they had not expected was his expertise in the niceties of domestic policy. For one whose original mentor had been Noel Skelton, the originator of the concept of the 'property owning democracy' among One Nation Tories, this was only to be expected. Satisfyingly, one of the earliest projects he had worked on with James Stuart, the Secretary of State, in the early 1950s had been the proposal to build a Forth Road Bridge, which was finally accomplished in the closing days of his Premiership.

Foreign events also loomed large - Cyprus, where civil war had broken out, Rhodesia and the growing threat of a rebel breakaway (a topic which involved Home in his second spell as Foreign Secretary in the early 1970s), clashes on the borders of Yemen and Aden, and a row with Spain over frigates. In July Home chaired the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' conference in London, in which the question of Southern Rhodesia was of central importance. Clashes between America and North Vietnam in the Gulf of Tonkin also contributed to the volatile atmosphere that summer. Home showed a sure hand in all these crises - Rab Butler was quite happy to leave the day to day response to Downing Street, a rare example of the Foreign Office not being discomfited by No 10's involvement in Foreign Affairs. Gradually Conservative fortunes and morale were on the rise. 'The government could be seen to be governing' was one Press comment at this time. There was a growing feeling that, against all the odds, the Tories might just win another term.

After Parliament had risen on 31 July (the first anniversary of the Peerage Act becoming law) Home wrote to all Cabinet Ministers warning against complacency over the summer months. In his first six months in office Home had given 64 'full dress' speeches and 150 whistle stop homilies. A pre-election tour in Yorkshire in the summer had included a visit to Huddersfield, Harold Wilson's birthplace. The announcement of the election date was made on 18 September, with polling day set for 15 October. This would be five years and one week since Macmillan's victory on 8 October 1959, so the parliament was the longest since the interval between elections had been reduced to five years in 1911. The result - Labour 317 seats, Conservatives 304, and Liberals 9 - was also the closest in living memory, an overall majority of three once the Speaker had been re-elected.

Even then three events on 15 October 1964, had they taken place twenty four hours earlier would almost certainly have guaranteed a Conservative victory. As the polls closed (at 9 p.m. in those days, which is why Wilson successfully arranged with the BBC for the popular TV comedy Steptoe and Son to be delayed till later than its usual slot in the Thursday evening's schedules) news came of the downfall of the Russian leader Nikita Khrushchev. Indeed the early election broadcasts were far more concerned with this breaking news than exit polls, so dramatic and unexpected was it. There was also news of the successful Chinese nuclear explosion. Both of these global events could well have induced a sense of 'Safety First' that would have denied Wilson victory had they happened earlier. A more parochial event, if handled more subtly, could also have helped to change the result. The narrowness of the Labour victory could have been even more so if the Conservative MP for Brighton Kemp Town had not arranged for two hundred of the ladies from his constituency organisation to travel on an all day cross-channel shipping trip to Boulogne, leaving at 6 a.m. and returning in the small hours. Labour won Brighton Kemp Town, its first ever seat in Sussex, by 7 votes after 7 recounts. Subsequently, Home always said Boulogne not Calais would be forever engraved on his heart, that and Iain Macleod, towards whom his private anger was unbridled. Home shrewdly realised in his disappointment that the narrowness of defeat was actually a far worse result than a loss by 20 - 30 seats, as it guaranteed another election before long, in which, such are the vagaries of the electoral system and voters' feelings, Wilson would certainly be given a larger majority. Indeed, Wilson increased his majority to 97 in March 1966, by which time Home was no longer Conservative leader.

Home stood down in July 1965, one of the few party leaders to leave with dignity and at a time of his own choosing (Harold Wilson was another eleven years later), and in the first outing for the new rules he had

established Heath was elected leader, defeating Reginald Maudling and Enoch Powell. But this was not the end of Home's story in the upper reaches of the Conservative Party. Lord Rosebery once said that an ex-Prime Minister in the Commons was a danger to shipping, but that to include such a figure in a Cabinet was for the successor 'a fleeting and dangerous luxury.' There was never any question of Heath flinching from such a choice, and in June 1970 Home became Foreign Secretary for the second time, a figure of ballast and stability in Heath's administration, particularly over the Rhodesian rebellion. Few Prime Ministers have had such a useful post-No 10 career. The nearest parallel is Balfour, who also served as Foreign Secretary after his spell in No 10.

Home showed all his successors as party leader absolute loyalty, there was no sniping or tacit criticism whatever, not of Heath, Thatcher or Major. When Mrs Thatcher became Conservative leader in February 1975 she at once engaged in a lengthy correspondence with Home on foreign matters, on which she confessed ignorance that she needed to rectify. Home obliged and was a vital help in the four years of opposition Mrs Thatcher endured before entering No 10. In the early 1990s during the first Gulf war he was rung up on a regular basis by the Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd to be kept in touch with developments. Home outlived even Churchill, dying in October 1995 at the age of 92.

Home may have been Prime Minister 'for a very short time', but in that time he added a quiet dignity to British public life, despite the ridicule of the modish satirists, and surprising many pundits and politicians by his sense of clarity, efficiency, firmness and patriotism at a time when society seemed to be on an inexorable downward path in standards, propriety and sense of responsibility. After years at the Commonwealth Office and the Foreign Office Home had a clear understanding of Britain's place in a transitional post-war world. He knew that the former American Secretary of State Dean Acheson had spoken an unpalatable truth when he said that Britain had lost an Empire and failed to find a rôle. 'We have shed a terrible lot of power', he wrote reflectively over the Christmas recess in 1963 to Sir Michael Fraser of the Conservative Research Department, 'but it is useless to cry over spilt milk.' In the days of the Cold War, he was completely un sentimental about the Soviet Union and consistently pursued a policy of firmness, best evinced by the expulsion during his second spell as Foreign Secretary of 105 Russian spies from Britain. This attitude conditioned his views on African issues, notably the Congo, especially during its first 18 months of independence, when he emphasised the need for 'a government which will keep order and prevent a Communist takeover'. 'Had he been of another generation, he would have been of the Grenadiers and the 1914 heroes', observed Harold Macmillan. 'He gives that impression by a curious mixture of great courtesy, and even of yielding to pressure, with underlying rigidity on matters of principle.'

Home's Premiership was a one off, as Britain stood on the cusp of profound social change, and was of a kind never to be repeated. There were failures and misapprehensions inevitably. On his return to the Commons in November 1963 Home was shocked by the changes that had come about in parliamentary procedure since he had last spoken from the Front bench in July 1951, and by the sheer rudeness of many members. In the face of heckling, even abuse from the Opposition benches, he never established himself as a domineering parliamentarian. Nor did he ever fully come to grips with the demands of television, and the autocue. Both were areas where the Leader of the Opposition Wilson excelled. Interestingly, Home's most successful television broadcast was on the death of President Kennedy, when he spoke from the heart, not from the auto-cue the backroom boys had provided for him.

Yet as Dominick Sandbrook has shown in his study of this period Never Had It So Good, society in the early sixties was not one headlong rush to hedonism. There was a silent majority that wanted the old values, who were mistrustful of trend-setting and the lowest common denominator world of the media. For such people, and not only such people, Home appeared as a Prime Minister well fitted to represent Britain's interests. There was an innate inner calm and he never remotely debased the office. Home had many of the good points of his predecessors without their downside - like Balfour, he was willing to serve in Cabinet, after having held the top post, but was never aloof and indecisive; like Bonar Law, who freed the Cabinet Secretariat from its Lloyd George Garden Suburb connotations, but without his sometimes angular responses, he renewed the system of Cabinet Committees, a progeny of the Secretariat, and liberated the Civil Service from its purdah, regarding the Opposition; like Baldwin, but without his long periods of inactivity, he represented a kind of country viewpoint that saw Westminster as a part, a necessary part of public life, but by no means the be-all and end-all. Just as Baldwin really did like leaning over a fence in Worcestershire and scratching a pig, so Home was most at ease, with his labrador, fishing on the Tweed, as his portrait in the National Portrait Gallery shows him. He was never seduced by the metropolitan world. As Selwyn Lloyd said, without any sense of irony, of the Conservative Party's difficulties in the late 1960s, 'the trouble is that only Alec and myself are provincials.' The world that followed was a more technocratic, even soulless one. Like Attlee, Home was a down to earth figure of common sense, who left flashy charisma to others, got on with the job and made time for the cricket scores, as befitted the only Prime Minister to have played first class cricket.

Home was the last flourishing of a particular strand of British public life, 'an utterly authentic evocation of deep, traditional, landed Toryism' in the words of Peter Hennessy. 'He was like the very last of the steam locomotives which were on their twilight journeys at exactly this time. Perhaps he was a kind of human Coronation Scot. Or more likely, given his country pursuits, he was Mallard, pulling one last express from King's Cross to Edinburgh and sounding its distinctive whistle in a plaintive farewell as it crossed the Royal

Border Bridge above the River Tweed at Berwick.'

And in the words of the family motto, he was 'True to the end'.

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