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The General Election, 1945 Transcript

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23 September 2014

Six General Elections: 1945

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This is the first in a series of six lectures on significant post-War General Elections, and the sixth and final lecture will be in May 2015, on the Tuesday after the Election, on the 2015 General Election, which I am sure, will be very significant.

Historians first began to study elections after 1945 in order to destroy myths which so often build up about them, and some of these myths are encapsulated in slogans, like: in 1918, "Hang the Kaiser" or "Home for Heroes"; in 1924, the Zinoviev Letter; in 1931, the bankers' ramp. Now, this lecture is on 1945, which is perhaps, arguably, the most significant of all post-War Elections, and one of the myths about that, as I will try and show, is the influence of Winston Churchill, in a famous speech, in which he said that socialism could only come about with the aid of a political police, a "Gestapo", no doubt humane in the first instance. Anyone who criticises today's adversarial politics and looks back fondly to a time when political controversy was rather gentler and consensus politics reigned might ask whether, today, any political leader would dare compare his opponents to the Gestapo... Some people assume that, by contrast with today, there was a period in the past of much gentler consensus politics, but there was certainly no consensus in 1945. It was a bitter Election. So, it is important to study the real factors which decide elections.

The 1945 Election led to the first Labour Majority Government, and it was also the first time ever that Labour gained more votes than the Conservatives. It is true that there had been two Labour Minority Governments between the Wars, in 1924 and 1929, but on each of those occasions, the Conservatives won more votes than Labour. But perhaps one reason why the 1945 Election is so significant is that it was such a tremendous surprise, and perhaps the most surprising outcome of any election in the twentieth century. Hardly anyone predicted that Winston Churchill, the great War leader, would be defeated. Most people, and that includes most of the leaders of the Labour Party, thought he was bound to win, just as Lloyd George had won the 1918 Election, a so-called "khaki election" - he had won it as the man who had won the War.

Even on Election Day, most of the newspapers assumed that Churchill would win. The leader in the Daily Express on Election Day said: "There are reasons for expecting that, by tonight, Mr Churchill and his supporters will be returned to power." In some way, there was a good basis for that because Churchill, throughout the War, had had tremendous support. His support in opinion polls during the War had never fallen below 78%, and for most of the time, it had been well over 80%.

Now, I thought we might begin with hearing the two major party leaders. Of course, there was no television in those days. It was suspended during the War. There were radio broadcasts, but I cannot find recordings of them. If anyone knows where they exist, I would be interested to hear. But the Pathé Newsreel Company did film the two party leaders, and I thought we might start with Churchill. You will see that he is not, I think, quite at his best. Perhaps he was exhausted after the end of the European War, and perhaps he sensed, as the voters did, that the problems of peace were very different from those of war, very complex, and that he might not be able to represent the nation as well in peacetime as he had been able to do in war.

So, let us see Churchill's broadcast...

[Video plays]

Five years ago, I promised you blood, toil, tears and sweat, and your untiring response brought us, in the end, victory over Germany. Today, we still have tears, not so many, thank God, but the conquest of Japan, hand-in-hand with our American allies, is a formidable undertaking which we must, and will, see through to the end. And we must still look forward, alas, to blood and sweat. We have a terrific task ahead of us. We have a shattered world around us, and we must help to rebuild it. We must strive for a sane and just peace, which will save us all and our children from the constant fear of war. Our trade and industry must be restored to a sound peacetime footing, so as to ensure steady employment for all. We must strive to give everybody greater security against poverty, unemployment, sickness and old age. Above all, we must tackle

the housing problem with the same drive which we put into our war effort. Up till now, nearly all the builders have been at the wars. Up till now, those at home have been mainly absorbed in bomb repairs. But we are making good headway, and everything in human power will be done. Here are our tremendous tasks. They cannot be solved by glib promises, but only by national effort, in which all of us must take our share. Every man and woman must be prepared to put his best effort into the job because it is only by hard work, enterprise, energy, and teamwork that we can win. That is why I am asking today for the support of all men and women of goodwill. During the War, I rested my trust in the British people. Time after time, I warned them of the dangers ahead, and they never failed. Once again, now, today, I must tell you that, in spite of all our victories, a rough road lies ahead. What a shame it would be and what a folly to add to our load the bitter quarrels with which the extreme socialists are eager to convulse and exploit these critical years. For the sake of the country and of your own happiness, I call upon you to march with me, under the banner of freedom, towards the beacon lights of national prosperity and honour, which must ever be our guides.

Now, we have a great contrast, because Churchill was defeated by the Leader of the Labour Party, Clement Attlee, who Peter Hennessey once compared to Captain Mannering in Dad's Army, and a great contrast. We can now hear Attlee...rather shorter...

[Video plays]

The Parliament of 1935 had a big Conservative majority, and the policy pursued by the Conservative Government landed this country into war. It was due to the action of the Labour Party that this Conservative Government resigned. Mr Churchill, who had opposed his own Party, formed an all-Party Government which successfully brought us to victory. Now, a new Parliament must be elected. The choice is between that same Conservative Party, which stands for private enterprise, private profit, and private interests, and the Labour Party, which demands that, in peace, as in war, the interests of the whole people should come before those of a section. Labour puts first things first: security from war, food, houses, clothing, employment, leisure, and social security for all, must come before the claims of the few for more rent, interest and profit. We have shown that we can organise the resources of the country to win the War; we can do the same in peace.

Clement Attlee was much less well-known to the public at that time than Churchill. He had been elected Leader of the Labour Party in 1935 as a stopgap. Indeed, as I will show, there was an attempt at a coup against Attlee, both before and after the General Election, and during the Election, the Evening Standard called him a caretaker, but in fact, he is the longest lasting political leader of any major party in the twentieth century, from 1935 to 1955, twenty years. He lasted longer as Leader than Margaret Thatcher, who was there for fifteen years as Leader of the Conservative Party. It is also the case that Margaret Thatcher was repudiated by her Party in 1990; Attlee was not – he retired voluntarily, with his reputation high.

But that was not the expectation when he became Labour Leader in 1935. One of his colleagues, Hugh Dalton, wrote in his diary, "A little mouse shall lead them."

Beatrice Webb wrote in her diary: "He looked and spoke like an insignificant elderly clerk, without distinction in the voice, manner or substance of his discourse. To realise that this little non-entity is the Parliamentary Leader of the Labour Party, and presumably he future Prime Minister, is pitiable."

In 1940, the newspaper magnate, Cecil King, having heard him speak, described him as "...of very limited intelligence and no personality. If one heard he was getting £6 a week in the service of the East Ham Corporation, one would be surprised he was earning so much.

And Aneurin Bevan, the left-wing leader of the Labour Party, said that Attlee "seems determined to make a trumpet sound like a tin whistle".

In 1942, there was an opinion poll on who should be the best successor to Churchill. Only 2% mentioned Attlee, and even in 1945, he was hardly known to the wider public because, although he had been Deputy

Prime Minister, his work had been behind the scenes, chairing committees. Now, he was a most efficient and effective chairman. Some civil servants, indeed, said he was the best chairman they had ever known, but of course, this was not known to the public.

Anyone who thinks that Ed Miliband has rather a lot of flak and perhaps has been too severely criticised, and that there was once a golden age when politicians were treated more gently, should look back at what Attlee had to contend with. And yet, he proved to be one of the most successful Prime Ministers of the century, and oddly enough, his very lack of charisma proved an advantage.

The Labour Party had been led by a charismatic Leader, Ramsay MacDonald, and they believed that he had betrayed them. The Party had had enough of charismatic Leaders. The fundamental purpose of the Labour Party at that time was to represent the working class. The Leader did not have to be from the working class, but he had to have experience and sympathy of working class conditions. Attlee himself was middle class, the son of a prosperous solicitor, who had been a graduate of Oxford, but he had gained experience of the working class working for many years with boys' clubs in the East End of London where he lived, and he then became Mayor of Stepney before winning a Labour seat in Parliament. His colleague and jealous rival, Herbert Morrison, whom Attlee defeated in 1935, but Morrison never really accepted that defeat, but at the end of both their lives, when Morrison was asked to sum up Attlee's career, after he had been Prime Minister, he said, waspishly, that he had been the best Mayor that Stepney had ever had.

But Attlee probably had the widest experience of working class and grassroots politics of any Labour Leader ever. He understood the Labour Party and said he did not believe that he was any wiser than the majority in the Party. He saw himself as the servant and spokesman of his Party, and that was the key to his success.

The 1945 landslide, like the Liberal landslide of 1906 under Campbell-Bannerman, shows that a party does not have to have a charismatic Leader to win a landslide victory. Twentieth century landslides have been won by quite uncharismatic Leaders, and indeed, Ernest Bevin, who became Foreign Secretary in Attlee's Government, said of Attlee, "He's our Campbell-Bannerman."

Margaret Thatcher, in her memoirs, pays tribute to Attlee. He was, she says, "...a radical patriot and more substance than show, unlike," as she puts it, "more recent Prime Ministers." I wonder who she had in mind...

Attlee wrote a limerick about himself at the end of his life:

*Few thought he was much of a starter,
There were many who thought themselves smarter,
But he ended up PM,
CH and OM,
An Earl and a Knight of the Garter.*

And the contrast between Churchill and Attlee is also there in the way they described, in their memoirs, becoming Prime Minister. Churchill said this: "I felt as if I were walking with destiny and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and this trial." Attlee was asked in the 1960s, "What were your own emotions on becoming Prime Minister?" and he replied, "Just to know that there were jobs to be done." "You didn't feel that destiny had overtaken you?" He said, "No, I had not much idea about destiny."

In his memoirs, he writes about Election Day in the following way. He said: "I got back to Stanmore on the evening of the count. During the count, Labour victories began to come in, Conservative Ministers were losing seats, and we were making a clean sweep of the big towns. As the day wore on, country results confirmed our victory, and by the middle of the afternoon, it was clear that we had won a great victory. Lord Portal, who was Chairman of the Great Western Railway, gave the family tea at Paddington, and presently I was told by the Prime Minister that he was resigning. A summons to the Palace followed. My wife drove me

there and waited outside for me. The King gave me his commission to form a government. He always used to say that I looked very surprised, as indeed I certainly was, at the extent of our success. We went to a victory rally at Westminster Central Hall, where I announced that I had been charged with the task of forming a government, looked in at a Fabian Society gathering, and then returned to Stanmore after an exciting day."

The Times obituary of Attlee, in October 1967, said: "Much that he did was memorable; very little that he said..." which I think is right.

But the outcome, as I have said, was a surprise. Now, why did it happen?

Here, I hope I have got a hand-out of the 1935 Election, yes...You can see the Conservatives won a large majority and seemed securely in power. This election victory, in fact, was the second Conservative landslide, following that of 1931, when the Conservative-dominated national government had won no fewer than 554 seats, and Labour just 52. Labour was blamed for the financial crisis and for running away. In 1935, voters still remembered the financial crisis of 1931, and they feared that, if a Labour Government, was returned to office, the economy would be in a mess and financial crisis would return. Some in the audience would no doubt say "Plus ça change"...

Now, all the evidence we have is that if there had not been a War but a peacetime election in 1940, the Conservatives would have won that too, but Labour had made somewhat of a recovery from the terrible defeat of 1931, but seemed on a plateau that was not much above 38% or 40%. Now, opinion polls in Britain, the Gallup poll, began in 1937, and the peak Labour reached before the War was, I think, 40%.

But in 1940, a Coalition Government was formed, in which Labour held many of the key positions. Indeed, it was Labour, as Attlee implied in his election broadcast, that forced the resignation of Neville Chamberlain, Labour and Tory rebels, because, in a debate on the Norway expedition in May 1940, the normal Conservative majority of over 200 fell to 81, and it was clear to all that the War could only be continued under a Coalition Government. Labour was asked whether it would join such a government, and they said they would, but not under Neville Chamberlain, so that meant that Chamberlain had to resign and Winston Churchill became PM. The formation of the Coalition in 1940 was a political event of fundamental importance because it seemed to legitimise Labour criticism of the Conservative Governments of the 1930s, because those Governments seemed, first, as Attlee said, they seemed to have failed to keep the peace through their policy of appeasement, and secondly, they seemed to have failed to prepare Britain adequately for war. Shortly after the evacuation of Dunkirk, a pamphlet was published called "Guilty Men", which blamed the Conservatives for everything that had gone wrong in the 1930s in foreign policy. But it was not only foreign policy, it was domestic policy as well because, during the War, everyone was employed and people asked themselves, "If we can have full employment in wartime, why not also in peacetime?"

Then, in 1941, the Soviet Union became an ally when attacked by Germany, and, although we now know the losses were horrendous, it seemed to be doing well in holding its own, and people attributed that to the success of Soviet planning and Soviet socialism. In 1943, a home intelligence report said that there was an almost unanimous belief that "the success of the Russian armies is due to the political system of that country". Now you might say, "Well, why didn't that help the Communist Party?" which did gain a little in membership but of course nothing like the Labour Party. The answer is, I think, that people took the view that the Soviet system was the Russian version of socialism, but the Labour Party was the British version of socialism. So, once Labour was in the government, it seemed they had been right to oppose the Conservatives in the 1930s - Conservative policies seemed the wrong policies.

Oppositions, however, often face the accusation that they are inexperienced, that although they may be very good critics of the government, they really would not be able to handle the problems of government practically. Now, you could not say that of the Labour Party in 1945 because, after all, Labour had been in government for five years. The Conservatives could not say Labour was incompetent or extreme, though Churchill did say those things, but it appeared rather ludicrous.

The Labour Ministers were mainly concerned with the home front. The leading Conservatives, Churchill and Eden, were mainly concerned with fighting the War, but the Ministers who the average person would come into contact with on the home front were Labour - for example, Ernest Bevin, who was Minister of Labour & National Service, Herbert Morrison, who was Home Secretary, and Hugh Dalton, who was President of the Board of Trade. So, Labour had a kind of a double-dividend: it was both in government but also in opposition. It got credit for the good decisions the government had made; it also got credit for having been the opposition in the 1930s.

Now, opinion polls were forbidden for a time in the War, and the last one published, the last Gallup poll, was in February 1940, that gave the Neville Chamberlain Government, you may be surprised to hear, 51% of the vote, and the opposition parties 27% of the vote. Sometimes, when reading about the period, or watching Neville Chamberlain on television, you might get the impression that the whole country was against him, that he was enormously unpopular. In fact, the Chamberlain Government was enormously popular until it actually fell. Now, when polling resumed, in June 1943, there had been a turnaround. The Labour Party had 38% of the vote, and the Conservatives had just 31% of the vote.

During the War, there was an electoral truce between the parties - they agreed not to oppose each other, but the Conservatives began losing seats to independents who were on the left and to a new short-lived left-wing party called Common Wealth. The Conservative Party lost eleven seats in by-elections during the War. Some of these by-elections were given a huge significance. In the Eddisbury by-election in 1943, the Common Wealth Party issued a poster saying "Hitler is watching Eddisbury", and in a seat in Daventry in Northamptonshire, the Conservative candidate said, "Three countries will be pleased if I am defeated - Germany, Italy and Japan," rather implausible.

The real change of mood came, in my view, with the publication of the Beveridge Report in December 1942, because, shortly after that, in February 1943, there was a debate in Parliament on the Beveridge Report and the Coalition Government's line was that this was really excellent but we cannot make any promises about it - we have to see whether we can afford it. That seemed to remind people of what they saw as broken promises after 1918, promises of homes fit for heroes and other social reforms, but in the end, it proved the country could not afford it. There was a revolt by MPs against the Coalition line and 119 MPs voted against it, including 97 Labour MPs. All but two Labour backbenchers voted against their own Government's line. Incidentally, it was Lloyd George's last Parliament vote - he voted with the rebels for immediate implementation of the Beveridge Report. So, that was a clear sign that the Government might be out of touch with parliamentary opinion and perhaps public opinion.

Now, Labour's lead grew as the War went on, and a Gallup poll in 1945 put Labour 20% ahead of the Conservatives. I will try and work this this and you will see the results of the General Election. You can see that the Conservatives actually gained from February 1945. The Election was in July.

But I think, now, if we saw an opinion poll which put one party 20% ahead of another, five months before the election, we would say that the party 20% behind really had no chance. At that time, as I have said, opinion polls were fairly new, they had begun in 1937, rather untried, and most people took no notice of them. They preferred, as some do today, to rely on their intuition, which told them Churchill was unbeatable, and most Labour leaders also believed that the Conservatives were bound to win, possibly with a reduced majority.

On the day of the Election, a liberal newspaper called the News Chronicle, which no longer exists, published a Gallup poll which indicated the actual result almost precisely, almost 100% - it was absolutely right, but hardly anyone took the slightest notice of it.

To understand what happened in 1945, you must remember that, although this is now obvious to us, it was not obvious to people then, and almost everyone, including the Labour leaders, believed that Churchill was bound to win. Had they thought differently, they would have acted differently no doubt.

The truth is that Westminster had become very insulated from political change, from what was happening in the country. We have seen that recently I think in the Scottish Referendum, that things were happening in

Scotland which took the leaders by surprise – I mean, they were aware of it because they took notice of opinion polls, but then they did not so they were unaware of it.

Churchill was particularly insulated, for the obvious reason that he was concentrating on the War.

The Election came about in rather curious, and indeed unique, circumstances...

Victory in Europe Day was the 8th of May and that meant there was a strong case for an Election. There had not been an election for ten years, since 1935. There was no reason then to continue the Coalition Government, but when should the election be called?

Now, Churchill, despite his reputation as a fire-eater of the right, was always attracted to the idea of coalitions, and certainly a coalition that he could lead, and the Wartime cooperation had given him great respect for Labour leaders, particularly Ernest Bevin, and, in a radio broadcast, as early as March 1943, he invited the Labour Party to continue with the Coalition after the War. Surprisingly, perhaps, leading Labour figures agreed with him – Bevin agreed with that, Herbert Morrison agreed, and Hugh Dalton agreed. So, there would be another coupon election, like that of 1918, which Lloyd George, a Liberal, had fought with the Conservatives. In September 1943, Dalton told a newspaper editor it would be “total lunacy” for the Labour Party to fight Churchill. But the Labour rank and file would not have it – they said we want to fight the election as an independent party.

Nevertheless, in May 1945, after VE Day, Churchill made another bid, of a more limited kind. He spoke to the Labour leaders asking if they would agree to extend the Coalition until the war with Japan was over. Now, that, at the time, they thought would be another eighteen months because people did not anticipate the effects of the atom bomb – some did not even know about it. But there was a problem that was faced because the Government had agreed to go to the country as soon as the War in Europe was over. There was no mandate for the extension of Parliament’s time. So, Churchill proposed a referendum to extend the Coalition. Of course, Britain had never had a referendum at that time, but he said let us have a referendum to get approval to extend the Coalition, and what he proposed to do was to publish a letter to Attlee inviting Labour to continue the Coalition until the end of the Japanese war. Attlee and the other Labour leaders agreed to this, but there said there had to be an addition to the letter that Churchill had drafted, and the addition was an extra sentence which said this: “In the meanwhile, we should do our utmost to implement the proposals of social security and full employment contained in the White Paper which we have laid before Parliament.” Churchill agreed to that, and the letter was published, and the decision then had to be approved – it seemed at first a formality – by the National Executive of the Labour Party and the rank and file, because the leaders could not agree to coalition on their own. That is what Ramsay MacDonald had done in 1931 and he had been repudiated, and Attlee was not going to make that mistake.

By chance, the Labour Party Conference was meeting at that time, in May, and Attlee took the proposals to the National Executive, where Bevin proposed it. Attlee, characteristically, and this is part of his strength perhaps as Labour Party Leader, he said nothing. He gave no lead. He waited for the others to say what they thought. The others said they were totally against it, with only three dissentions, whom were all trade unionists, and when it came to the Conference, it was rejected almost unanimously. So, we have got this odd situation that the Leader of the Labour Party, who was going to become Prime Minister, did not want to fight an election which was going to bring him victory, but was then overruled by his own Party, telling him he had to fight the election.

There was another strange thing that happened, immediately after that Conference: there was an attempt to remove Attlee as Leader. The Chairman of the National Executive of the Labour Party, Harold Laski, a political scientist, incidentally, an academic, he wrote a letter to Attlee – it was not made public at the time of course – that there was “...a widespread feeling,” he said, “that the continuance of your leadership,” and I think he was expressing the view of the Labour Party, “the continuance of your leadership is a grave hardship to our hopes of victory in the coming General Election.” He said: “Your resignation of the leadership would now be a great service to the Party. Just as Mr Churchill changed Auchinleck for Montgomery before El Alamein, so I suggest you owe it to the Party to give it the chance to make a comparable change on the eve of this the greatest of our battles.” Attlee replied, a short letter, and he said: “Dear Laski, Thank you for your

letter, the contents of which have been noted.” He did not resign the leadership.

Instead, he wrote to Winston Churchill rejecting the proposal to continue with the Coalition and saying that the idea of the referendum was unBritish and a weapon of communist and fascist dictators, though he had been perfectly happy to agree to the draft of the letter proposed. None of this, of course, was known to the public, these background manoeuvres.

Now, the Labour decision not to continue the Coalition was as decisive as the decision not to join a government under Chamberlain in 1940. The first decision, in 1940, put Churchill into Downing Street; the second decision removed him from Downing Street. It showed the increasing power and influence of the Labour Party and of its leaders, because Churchill was put there by the Labour Party and ejected by the Labour Party, and the Labour leaders themselves were dragged out of the Churchill Coalition by the scruff of their necks and against their wishes.

Churchill was terribly upset at getting Attlee’s letter of rejection and especially at the loss of Ernest Bevin. He wrote to him shortly afterwards, “You know what it means to me not to have your aid in these terrible times,” and then he revealed his hope that the return to party warfare would be temporary. He said, “We must hope for a reunion when party passions are less strong.” He continued to hanker after coalition.

Still, Labour’s decision meant that the Coalition had to come to an end, and Churchill wrote to the King asking if he might resign, and in typical Churchillian language, he said, “.to bring this present, and not inglorious, administration to an end”. He then held a party with the Labour leaders to commemorate the Government, and again, with characteristic language, he told them: “The light of history will shine on all your helmets”, and the party went into the garden to be photographed, but then it started to rain rather heavily, and Churchill said, “We’d better finish this or my political opponents will say that it is a conspiracy on my part to give them all rheumatism.”

Now, Churchill was asked by the King to form a new caretaker government, composed mainly of Conservatives, to prepare for the election, and that government was formed on the 23rd of May. It lasted two months, until the election result was known. Churchill, again typically, said that a caretaker government was a good title, because “It means we shall take very good care of everything that affects the welfare of Britain and of all classes in Britain.”

And so the campaign began. There was no television, as I have said. There were radio broadcasts, and the first was given by Churchill, in which he said this: “A free Parliament! A free Parliament – look at that! It is odious to the socialist doctrinaires. My friends, I must tell you that a socialist policy is abhorrent to the British ideas of freedom. There can be no doubt that socialism is inseparably interwoven with totalitarianism and the abject worship of the State. No socialist government conducting the entire life and industry of the country could afford to allow free, sharp or violently worded expressions of public discontent. They would have to fall back on some form of Gestapo.” Churchill pronounced Gestapo with a soft “G” and the accent on the last syllable – Gest-a-po, which perhaps added to its force. “...some form of Gestapo, no doubt very humanely directed in the first instance.” Labour, he said, would “...gather all the power to the supreme party and the party leaders, rising like stately pinnacles above their vast bureaucracies of civil servants, no longer servants and no longer civil.” Socialism was “an attack on the right of the ordinary man and woman to breathe freely, without having a harsh, clumsy, tyrannical hand clapped across their mouth and nostrils.”

You must remember this speech was delivered very shortly after the clearest possible evidence of the Nazi death camps with the liberation of Belsen. It was a few weeks after people discovered what they had suspected, but the horror I think proved worse than most people had imagined. And it was rather absurd to suggest that Attlee’s Coalition colleagues were secret totalitarians and here, again, it was an advantage that Attlee was Leader of the Labour Party because you could not see him really as a Hitler or Himmler in disguise. It is, after all, pretty odd that Churchill made that speech, after seeking from Attlee and other Labour leaders continuation of the Coalition. If he really thought the Labour leaders were totalitarian, why did he want to continue with them in government?

The best criticism of him I think was made by his daughter, Sarah, who wrote the following letter to him. She said people would "...certainly not tolerate totalitarianism, but they will not understand why socialism leads to this, because socialism as practised in the War did no one any harm and quite a lot of people good. The children of this country have never been so well-fed or healthy. What milk there was was shared equally. The rich did not die because their meat ration was no larger than the poor, and there is no doubt that this common sharing and feeling of sacrifice was one of the strongest bonds that unified us. So, why, they say, cannot this common feeling of sacrifice be made to work as effectively in peace?" A very powerful critique, in my view, and explanation of Labour's victory...

The next day, Attlee gave a brilliant and waspish reply on the radio and he said this: "When I listened to the Prime Minister's speech last night, I realised at once what was his object. He wanted the electors to understand how great was the difference between Winston Churchill, the great leader in war of a united nation, and Mr Churchill, the Party Leader of the Conservatives. He feared lest those who had accepted his leadership in war might be tempted, out of gratitude, for having followed him further. I thank him for having disillusioned them so thoroughly."

But, in his second broadcast, Churchill continued with this theme. He said: "In the socialist system, all effective and healthy opposition and the natural change of parties in office from time to time would necessarily come to an end, and a political police would be required to enforce an absolute and permanent system upon the nation."

In his third broadcast, he said: "Under socialism, central government is to plan for all our lives and tell us exactly where we are to go and what we are to do, and any resistance to their commands will be punished." The Executive, he said, "...could not allow itself to be challenged or defeated at any time, in any form of Parliament they might allow."

Now, the Election was held on the 5th of July, but the results were not declared for three weeks, until the 26th of July, and that was for two reasons: firstly, because of wakes week in the North of England, the elections in some of the North of England constituencies were postponed for a week or two weeks, so things were staggered; but more important, the vote was counted three weeks later to give time for the votes of soldiers overseas to be counted. So, there was a three-week gap.

Churchill took a brief holiday in France, before going to the Potsdam Conference as Prime Minister, and he said his holiday was rather ruined because he said, "The mystery of the ballet boxes and their contents had an ugly trick of knocking on the door and peering in at the window."

On the 26th of July, as he was leaving Potsdam, he told his doctor he had had a premonition in the form of a dream. He said, "I dreamed that life was over." He said, "I saw, and it was very vivid, my dead body under a white sheet on a table, in an empty room." He said, "I recognised my bare feet projecting from under the sheet. It was very lifelike. Perhaps this is the end." He woke up on the day of the Election, he said, with "a stab, a sharp stab of almost physical pain".

Now, he had promised his military adjutant, who was listening and watching the results with him, he had promised him a brandy for every Conservative gain, but the poor man only got three brandies. There were three victories against the swing. If Attlee had promised that, which he had never dreamed of doing, there had have been over 200 brandies because Labour won over 200 seats.

The turnout was 73%, higher than in 2010 when it was 65%, and remarkable since register was out-of-date, very out-of-date, and of course many people had been displaced by bombing – it was a pretty chaotic situation. It was not as high as the peak turnout in 1950 of 84%, nor of course for the recent Scottish referendum of 85%, but it was pretty good – 73%.

Now, the swing differed very greatly in different parts of the country, and this gives us a clue I think as to

why Labour won. There was a very low swing, perhaps surprisingly, in Glasgow – it was just 2%. The largest swings were in the suburbs of London and Birmingham, where they were around 23%. Now, these of course were middle class areas. It was those areas which were swinging to Labour. The working class seats had already been Labour in 1935. They gave Labour a plateau of 40%. What was remarkable about this Election was the swing in suburban seats of London and Birmingham. It was a larger swing than 1931, larger than in 1997, and larger I think than any election in the twentieth century, except possibly 1906 or 1918. The average swing was 13%.

Remarkably, Churchill himself attracted considerable opposition, personal opposition. The Labour and Liberal parties agreed not to put up a candidate against him in his Woodford constituency, but an unknown Independent came to stand against him and won over 10,000 votes. Churchill's majority was actually reduced. In 1935, he had fought the Liberals and Labour and had a majority of over 20,000; in 1945, against an unknown Independent, it was reduced to 17,000, a remarkable sign of the absence of personal popularity, if you like.

Churchill's wife attempted to soften the blow by saying to him, "It may well be a blessing in disguise," and Churchill said, "At the moment, it seems quite effectively disguised."

His doctor said this showed ingratitude on the part of the British people. He said, "No, I wouldn't call it that. They've had a very hard time."

He told his military adjutant, "They are perfectly entitled to vote as they please – this is democracy. This is what we've been fighting for."

He went to the Cabinet Room and said to his closest colleague, mistakenly, he said to Anthony Eden, he said, "Thirty years of my life have been passed in this room. I shall never sit in it again. You will, but I shall not." It proved to be a false forecast.

He wrote to his cousin: "I must confess, I have found the events of Thursday rather odd and queer, especially after the wonderful welcomes I had from all classes. There was something pent up in the British people after 20 years which required relief. It is like 1906 all over again."

In the visitors' book at Chequers, he wrote "Finis".

He went to see the King to resign, and the King offered him the Order of the Garter, which Churchill declined. He said he could not accept the Order of the Garter when the voters had just given him the order of the boot! Anthony Eden also refused the Garter for a similar reason...

So, meanwhile of course, the focus came to the Labour Party. Now, in the early afternoon of the 26th of July, as results were coming in, there was a meeting of the Labour leaders, Attlee, Bevin and Morrison, and the General Secretary of the Labour Party. A message arrived from Churchill saying that he was conceding defeat and resigning. Herbert Morrison said that Attlee should not go to the Palace until the Parliamentary Labour Party had had the opportunity of electing a Leader, and he was supported in that by new people who were coming in – Cripps, Aneurin Bevan, and Dalton. Ernest Bevin asked, he said, "Do you think if I stood for the leadership that I would get it?" and the General Secretary of the Labour Party said, "Well, you might on a split vote." He said, "Clem, you go to the Palace right away!" Attlee then said: "You cannot win an Election and then say the question of the premiership is open. If you are invited by the King to form a Government, you don't say, you cannot reply for 48 hours, you accept the commission, and you either bring it off successfully or you don't, and if you don't, you go back and say you can't and advise the King to send for someone else." He had, after all, campaigned as the head of his Party, and the majority had voted for him as Leader. After all, voters were not voting for, shall we say, Herbert Morrison or Ernest Bevin as Prime Minister.

However, that was not the end of the move against Attlee. There was a victory meeting in the evening at the Central Hall in Westminster, and at that meeting, Herbert Morrison approached two colleagues and said, "There is a chance I shall be offered the premiership and I am not sure I am big enough to do it - what do you think?" He approached another Labour MP in the gents and said, "We cannot have this man as our Leader." The MP said it was too late to change.

Attlee arrived, saying he had just been to the Palace and accepted the King's commission. Even so, the next day, at a meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party's Administration Committee, Morrison again raised the question of electing a new Leader of the Labour Party, but got nowhere.

The meeting between Attlee and the King was rather difficult because they were both shy men, and at the beginning, none of them knew what to say or said anything, and the silence was apparently broken by Attlee saying, "I won the Election..." and the King apparently replied, "I know, I heard it on the six o'clock news." After Attlee left, the King, who was fairly shy himself, said that Attlee ought to be called not "Clem Attlee" but "Clam Attlee" because he was so silent.

Now, why did Labour win the Election? I think, first, one has got to destroy some myths, and the first is that the Gestapo speech cost the Conservatives the Election. Polls show that 84% had made up their minds before the election campaign began and that, as you have all seen, Labour was 20% ahead in February, so that the Conservatives actually gained support in the election period. The polls showed the Conservatives had no chance of winning. They gained during the election campaign and, without Churchill, the Conservatives might have done even worse and had a defeat like 1906, so you cannot blame the campaign or Churchill's speech, whatever you think of it.

The second myth was it was a vote for a revolution or a socialist transformation. On the 2nd of August, a week after the Election, President Truman of America arrived in Britain on board a steamer at Portsmouth and the King met him, and Truman said to the King, "I hear you've had a revolution," and the King replied, "Oh no, we don't have those here!"

It was a vote for social reform, and rather limited social reform, as long as it did not harm the middle classes too much. It was the middle classes who were the source of Labour's large majority because, in a sense, the revolution or the transformation of opinion had already occurred during the War, and the Election validated it because the aim of the Election was to preserve it and not to lose it. So, in that sense, it was conservative vote, with a small "c".

I think this shows two important features which are fundamental in most, if not every, British election: the first is that voters vote on concrete issues and not on ideology; and the second is that fear plays usually a larger role than hope. Now, it seems to me that, far from 1945 being a radical upsurge, the Labour Government was probably to the left of most of those who voted for it. Those who voted for it showed the British voter was deeply conservative, with a small "c", and that Labour could only win if it dispelled fears about what it might do. Now, in 1945, the fear factor helped Labour because people feared that, if the Conservatives were returned, we had gone back to the Britain of the inter-War years of high unemployment, so the fear was of what the Conservatives might do, not of what Labour might do. There was no fear that Labour might do something extreme or wild because it had showed its respectability during the War. The fear was the gains promised during the War would not be delivered, as voters believed had happened after the First World War. The main change in the climate of opinion, in my view, was amongst sections of the middle class, and that perhaps explains why the Labour majority disappeared so quickly, because the Labour policies of austerity and high taxation made life for the middle classes much more difficult than for the working classes, and so most of the Labour majority had already gone by 1950.

There was an analogy between 1945 and 1918, but most contemporary commentators missed it. The analogy was this: that in both cases, people were voting against a government which allegedly had not prepared Britain properly for war. In 1914, that was the Liberal, a government of the left, so the reaction in 1918 was to a government of the right; in the 1930s, it was a government of the right, and the reaction was then a government of the left. You may say, in the 1930s, the electorate, not the government, were really to blame because they had not wanted drastic rearmament, but they did in fact blame the government,

whether rightly or wrongly.

Harold Macmillan rather summed it up when he said the electors were voting not against Churchill, but against the ghost of Neville Chamberlain.

There is a further myth, that it was a vote from the servicemen that got Labour in, and that these servicemen were influenced by left-wing propaganda. Although there was an electoral truce during the War, there was not a political truce, and there was a body called the Army Bureau for Current Affairs which gave lectures on current affairs to servicemen to educate them in politics. They had tended to be, perhaps as is often the nature with those lectures, they veered to the left, they tended to be left-wing. It is true that the service vote was predominantly Labour, but you would expect that because the young tend to be rather more left-wing than older people, more left-wing than their elders. But turnout amongst soldiers was lower than amongst the population at large, only 59%, and indeed only two-thirds of servicemen eligible to vote registered. So, I do not think you can attribute the outcome to the servicemen's vote.

But one does have to remember the electorate of 1945 of course was not the same as that of 1935 - there was a generational factor with ten years, and those leaving the electorate through death would mostly have been born at a time before the Labour Party began in 1900. Now, given that political views are formed in late adolescence and, for the majority people, remain fixed, there would not be many Labour voters amongst the cohort which died. But the new cohort entering the electorate would have grown up at a time when Labour was a major party and the main opposition party, so the generational effect almost certainly helped the Labour Party.

Also, people believed that Russia had shown the State could plan things better, and that was well summed-up by one commentator, who said: "We have shown, in this War, that we British don't always muddle through. We have shown we can organise superbly. Look at these invasions of the Continent, which have gone like clockwork. Look at the harbours we have built on those beaches. No excuse anymore for unemployment and slums and under-feeding! Using even half the energy and invention and pulling together of what we have done in this War, what is there we cannot do? We have virtually exploded the arguments of old fogies and "better-notters", who have said we cannot afford this and we must not do that. If we can do it in war, why can't we do it in peace?"

Churchill did not understand that feeling. He summoned up a sense of purpose in war but not in peace. The main cry of the Conservatives was "Support Churchill!" but voters remembered the Conservative Party had opposed Churchill before the War, and they were now trying to use him to get another large majority.

So, you can see why the great reforming Government, led by an uncharismatic Leader, was elected in 1945 and why it led to rapid disillusion. In 1950, one Labour backbencher, Richard Crossman, said, in a Fabian lecture, "All the obvious things have been done which were fought for and argued about, and yet mysteriously enough, the ideal, the pattern of values has not been achieved. We have done them. We have created the means to the good life which they all laid down and said, if you do all these things, after that, there will be a classless society. Well, there isn't." And throughout the post-War period, Labour desperately tried to recover, mostly unavailingly, the spirit of 1945, and one may say that 1945 was a great victory from which the Labour Party has never recovered.

Thank you.