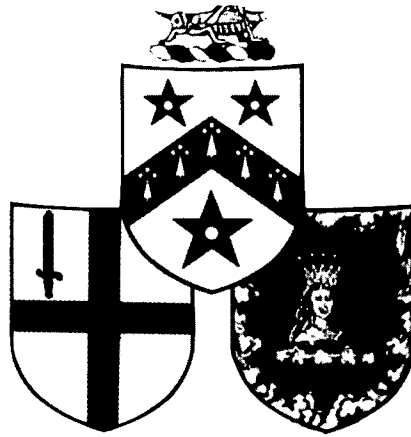


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PREMIERSHIP

Lecture 2

‘A SENSE OF ARCHITECTONICS’:
CLEMENT ATTLEE, 1945-51

by

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7 November 1995

GRESHAM COLLEGE

RHETORIC LECTURES 1995-96

'PREMIERSHIP' 2. 7 NOVEMBER 1995.

'A SENSE OF ARCHITECTONICS': CLEMENT ATTLEE, 1945-51.

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By the standards of any British political generation of modern times, Clem Attlee was decidedly diminuendo. On the Richter scale of charismatic leadership, the needle scarcely flickered. He had all the presence of a gerbil. That clever man of biting tongue but limited judgement, Hugh Dalton, declared the day Clem Attlee beat Herbert Morrison for the Labour leadership in 1935, 'it is a wretched disheartening result!' adding 'And a little mouse shall lead them.'¹ Some mouse. Dalton wasn't the last sophisticate to underestimate 'little Clem',² as Ernie Bevin affectionately called him, and Attlee's reputation has been rising almost ever since as the stop-gap leader who headed his party for 20 years, the mouse that stayed to become wartime Deputy Prime Minister and Prime Minister in his own right for six years, 'the little indiarubber man'³ as that shrewd political journalist, James Margach, described him. Margach, after years of watching Attlee from the House of Commons Press Gallery and sitting through his rare and profoundly unrevealing briefings of the Westminster lobby correspondents,⁴ acquired a crucial insight into the strange effectiveness of this most unlikely of premiers.

'Style,' he wrote, is normally 'seen in terms of the sweeping gesture, the dramatic entrance, the flair for histrionic glamour in the spotlight. But style can be equally powerful when it exploits non-style.'⁵ This Attlee did to perfection, not just in puncturing the grandiloquent rhetoric of Churchill in their parliamentary exchanges after 1945 or in driving the lobby correspondents to distraction with his staccato replies to their questions, but in the brusque memorability of his exchanges with ministerial colleagues and top officials. He knew his limitations, made a virtue of them and turned them into collectors' items. As his Economic Assistant in No.10 in 1945-46, Douglas Jay, put it: 'He would never use one syllable where none would do.'⁶ Denis Healey recalls his colleague in the postwar Labour Party Headquarters, Wilfred Fienburgh, as

saying 'that a conversation with an ordinary man was like a game of tennis; a conversation with Attlee was like throwing biscuits to a dog — all you could get out of him was yup, yup, yup.'⁷

Anyone could be on the receiving end of such treatment from the Head of State to a windy Labour backbencher. Legend has it, for example, that at 7:30 on the evening of 26 July 1945 when Attlee came to Buckingham Palace to 'kiss hands' as Prime Minister, a long silence was broken by the new premier finally saying:

'I've won the election.'

To which his equally shy Sovereign replied:

'I know. I heard it on the Six O'Clock News.'⁸

'I gather they call the Prime Minister "Clem",' the King said to his Private Secretary after this brief encounter. "'Clam'" would be more appropriate.'⁹

My own favourite dates from his final year as Leader of the Opposition when the menace of the hydrogen bomb was opening up that intra-party fissure on nuclear weapons that has vexed Labour virtually ever since. The scene is a room along the Committee corridor at Westminster. The occasion a meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party in 1954. That eloquent Welshman, Harold Davies, is delivering himself of a long and passionate warning about the dangers of thermonuclear horrors to come. Clem doodles (he was the greatest doodler ever to occupy No.10 and at least one member of the Cabinet Secretariat used to pinch them after Cabinet meetings¹⁰) — Clem doodles and smokes his pipe impassively as Davies goes into orbit. When he finally subsides, Attlee removes his pipe, lays down his pen and says: 'We'll watch it; meeting adjourned.'¹¹

But Attlee's reputation extends way beyond his economy with the verbosity. It has risen steadily since his death in 1967, so much so that he has become a kind of lodestar for the efficient and successful conduct of peacetime Cabinet government and premiership in the postwar years, and not just on the Labour side.

For example, that connoisseur of his own profession, Rab Butler, said of Harold Macmillan: 'He [Macmillan] was very good, only exceeded by little Attlee who had a habit of biting people in the pants.'¹² Macmillan himself said of Attlee that he was 'much underrated' and 'one of the best chairmen I have ever sat under.'¹³ And I shall never forget Christopher Soames a few years after Mrs Thatcher sacked him from her Cabinet telling me with great brio, despite confinement to his bed with flu, that 'she [Mrs Thatcher] was not really running a team. Every time you have a Prime Minister who wants to take all the decisions, it mainly leads to bad results. Attlee didn't. That's why he was so damn good...'¹⁴

Lord Callaghan learned 'from Attlee the advantage of keeping your mouth shut, and of not really exposing your point of view if you wanted to get your business through rather quickly in the Cabinet.'¹⁵ And he never forgot the brevity or the wisdom of Attlee's advice when appointing him to his first junior ministerial post in 1947: 'Remember you are playing for the first eleven now, not the second eleven. And if you are going to negotiate with someone tomorrow, don't insult him today.' Lord Callaghan was in and out of the Cabinet Room in two minutes.¹⁶

Lord Wilson has spoken of his 'filial devotion'¹⁷ to Attlee who sent him to the Board of Trade in 1947 at the tender age of 31, and George Thomas has attested to Wilson's habit of referring back to 'Clem' throughout his periods in Number 10; though it has to be said Harold Wilson's prolixity from the chair, especially during the Cabinets of his first premierships after 1964,¹⁸ shows that he had not fully imbibed Attlee's deliciously paradoxical line on the key to successful Cabinet government — 'Democracy means government by discussion, but it is only effective if you can stop people talking.'¹⁹ For Jo Grimond, for these and other reasons, Attlee was simply 'the best Prime Minister since the war.'²⁰ (I am pleased to report that even now, Clem Attlee presides over the Shadow Cabinet Room at Westminster in the form of a statuette on the mantelpiece.²¹)

Clem Attlee's Downing Street years between 1945 and 1951 have become a benchmark in another important sense, too, which continues to shape how we think about politics, government and the uses of the state power. For example, Nigel Lawson is right to treat what he calls the 'Attleeite settlement'²² and Mrs Thatcher's stewardship as the two great political weather systems that have dominated the ecology of postwar British government.

In a 1988 lecture to the Centre for Policy Studies, subtitled 'The Tide of Ideas from Attlee to Thatcher', Nigel Lawson claimed the Thatcher governments had

'transformed the politics of Britain — indeed Britain itself — to an extent no other government has achieved since the Attlee Government of 1945 to 1951...[which]...set the political agenda for the next quarter of a century. The two key principles which informed its actions and for which it stood, big government and the drive towards equality, remained effectively unchallenged for more than a generation, the very heart of the postwar consensus.'²³

For all Nigel Lawson's disapproval of the essentials of that postwar settlement, it is no bad epitaph for the pair of Attleean governments charged with reconstructing a nation a third of whose wealth had melted in the heat of war, which still carried huge and, at that time, largely inescapable overseas commitments and with a mandate to foster both social justice and industrial modernisation at home all drawing on what the diplomat, Paul Gore-Booth, called a 'thinly lined Exchequer.'²⁴

For several reasons, therefore, the early postwar years still deserve our current attention and it could well be that future premiers, whatever their political colouration, might benefit from studying the statecraft of the man who presided over it from within a cloud of pipesmoke as, Cabinet meetings over and his colleagues departed, he sat down to work in the Cabinet Room, red crayon poised to scribble 'Yes', 'No', or, if feeling especially effusive, 'Agreed' 'CRA' on the papers placed before him.²⁵

His terseness could cause problems even with the King for whom Attlee had the highest regard (he wept when news of George VI's death was brought to him in 1952).²⁶ Ever since that embarrassed exchange at the start of his premiership, so-called 'Audience Notes' have been prepared by both the Palace and Downing Street private secretaries to prevent any more drying-up at the weekly meeting between monarch and premier.²⁷ The King, however, continued to fret that his Prime Minister did not tell him more about what was going on²⁸ but both the Palace and the No.10 archives show that the moment the King requested more background, Mr Attlee would provide it.²⁹

Attlee's brusqueness could frighten people, both ministers and officials. Ronald Fraser, private secretary to the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Norman Brook, and a member of that formidable breed of Scottish public servant which enriched postwar Whitehall, has told me how Attlee would send cross memos through the newly installed pneumatic tube linking No.10 and the Cabinet Office upbraiding him for using Scottish archaisms in covering notes on Sir Norman's hugely influential steering briefs for Cabinet and Cabinet Committee meetings.³⁰

It was in the Cabinet Room above all, that Attlee, in the words of Sir George Mallaby, a Cabinet minute-taker, 'buzzed...[like a wasp] in your face and stung you hard'³¹ if you were ill-briefed or long-winded (unless, of course, you were his great friend and much admired protector, Ernest Bevin, who was indulged like no other, except perhaps, the veteran and greatly respected Lord Addison).³² Harold Wilson, the youngest cabinet minister since Pitt (as he enjoyed reminding people³³) could do a particularly good impression of Attlee-the-wasp: 'Attlee,' said Lord Wilson,

'was in complete charge of his Cabinet. He would start "Minutes of the last meeting," and if anyone dared to raise anything God help 'em.

There was one from Scotland, can't remember his name now, and he would say "Well, Prime Minister, I don't disagree but I do remember a similar occasion three years ago..." Attlee said "Do you disagree with the Minutes?" "No." "All right. Agreed. Next item."³⁴

George Strauss, Attlee's Minister of Supply, was honest about how bruising those stings could be. 'If a minister did something a bit wrong and made a mess of it,' he told Roy Hattersley many years later, 'Attlee would tell him off. And if that minister did something well...Attlee would say nothing about it. And sometimes we ministers used to say to ourselves "'It's a pity he's so ready to tell us off and he might sometimes say 'well done'"". ³⁵

And they all feared the summons to No.10 that might project them once more on to the backbenches. Unlike most of his predecessors and successors, Attlee didn't wrap his dismissals up. These encounters were as brief as the moment of appointment. 'He was the best butcher since the war', said Harold Wilson (who was one the worst). 'He'd send for a man and say: "Well, you've had a good innings; time to put your bat up in the pavilion." And that was it.'³⁶ 'This is a most unpleasant task,' Attlee once explained, after outlining the importance of being ruthless. 'But, in my experience 99 per cent of the people I had to sack took it very well and remained loyal.'³⁷ One of the few who didn't and asked 'Why?' was, according to Harold Wilson, simply told 'Not up to the job'.³⁸

I have concentrated initially on the tart flavour of Attlee because personality is such a powerful shaper of the premiership. So, of course, is the wider political climate in which those personality traits are displayed. Attlee was perched atop the largest single postwar majority (146) and protected by that brilliant bruiser, Ernie Bevin (the crucial figure in seeing-off the two embryonic challenges to Attlee's leadership of the party on election-victory day itself in 1945 and during the aftermath of the sterling crisis of 1947³⁹). His parliamentary party was, by Labour standards, relatively quiescent (with occasional dissenting outbursts as over foreign policy in 1947⁴⁰ or Ireland in 1949⁴¹) while the labour movement at large was firmly in the grip of trade union loyalists like Arthur Deakin of the Transport and General and Sam Watson of the Miners⁴².

But for the purposes of this series, I shall concentrate on how Attlee used that accumulated inheritance from past premierships (which I examined in my first lecture) and adapted it to the needs of his present. Though genuinely surprised to find himself in Downing Street as a result of the 1945 general election⁴³, Attlee had thought a great deal about the mechanics of No.10 and its relationship with the rest of Whitehall, as well as the efficiency of Cabinet government in general, both as Leader of the Opposition between 1935 and 1940 and as a leading figure within the War Cabinet thereafter. (In this he was probably only equalled by Ted Heath amongst postwar premiers).

Some of his thinking was quite radical. In the early 1930s, on the basis of his experience as Chancellor of the Duchy and later Postmaster-General in the second Labour government (both posts just below full Cabinet rank) Attlee concluded that: 'The Cabinet today is a gathering of some twenty people who with a few exceptions are immersed in detailed administration. It is quite unable to take a broad view on the strategy of the campaign....,' a position made all the more parlous by 'the fact that the Prime Minister [MacDonald] was constitutionally averse from taking decisions and entirely incapable of understanding the proper use of committees and experts.'⁴⁴ Attlee's recommendation for 'a radical change in the nature and composition of the Cabinet' embraced the idea of what later became known as 'overlords' — a 'Cabinet of ten' senior ministers with light departmental duties and charged with the oversight of bundles of activities to be carried out by ministers below Cabinet rank.⁴⁵

He outlined his thinking publicly in his Left Book Club volume, The Labour Party in Perspective, in 1937 turning his attention to the back-up available to the Prime Minister in this new, streamlined scheme of things. 'The Prime Minister,' he wrote, 'has no department. He has only private secretaries and the very small Cabinet secretariat. In order to carry through a co-ordinated plan of reconstruction, there will be required a well-equipped and diversified staff at the centre to work out the main lines of the plan which is to be implemented in the departments.'⁴⁶

At the very least this suggested Attlee had a kind of undeclared Prime Minister's Department in mind, an inclination strengthened by his experience as Deputy PM under Churchill. For example, on New Year's Eve 1942, he circulated a paper to the War Cabinet's Committee on Machinery of Government with the suggestion that the Chancellor of the Exchequer, as Finance Minister, should have his own Permanent Secretary in the Treasury. A separate figure, presumably the Head of the Civil Service, should continue to manage establishments and personnel policy in the Treasury while working 'directly under the Prime Minister, as First Lord of the Treasury.'⁴⁷ 'While I should not wish to establish a Prime's Department', Attlee informed the Cabinet committee,

'I think that the development of the Cabinet Secretariat is already tending to give a greater cohesion to the machine of government. The Prime Minister can of course look to all departments for advice and assistance, but in my view requires something more than Private Secretaries for carrying out his functions. In my view this second Permanent Secretary to the Treasury, while being head of the Establishments Branch, should also be something equivalent to a chef de cabinet to the Prime Minister.'⁴⁸

Attlee would have been aware of Lloyd George's experiment with his Prime Ministers Secretariat, the famous Downing Street 'Garden Suburb', but, revealingly, Attlee was seeking a Civil Service regular to run his new capacity for him rather than the strange mixture of outsiders LG recruited in early 1917.⁴⁹

One of the undoubted powers, almost an absolute one, which falls into the lap of a new PM on 'kissing hands' is the ability to remake, almost to reinvent, his personal machine in No.10. Premiers also have a pretty free hand over much of Whitehall, the size and scope of the Cabinet and the nature of the committees and the support systems that sustain it. Such powers were Attlee's from 26 July 1945. The paper trail he had laid down since 1932 would have suggested a revolution in the offing comparable to Lloyd George's in 1916-17. And the width and duration of that paper trail, in and out of government, indicates it was not a quick-dash, back-of-the-envelope

approach based on passing hunches. Mr Attlee's feeling for governance was genuine. He had that 'architectonic sense', that capacity to 'see the whole building not only the bricks' he thought indispensable in a premier after experiencing MacDonald's lack of it.⁵⁰ And he knew, too, that the servants of the state needed attention as well as its mechanics. (His paper to the Machinery of Government Committee in 1942 recognised that: 'The problem of the relationship of State and private enterprise will be very pressing after the war, and a knowledge of routine civil service methods will not be enough' with a Civil Service staff college, mixing officials and 'employees of big corporations' as a way of improving matters⁵¹).

So Attlee entered Downing Street with an impressive storehouse of prior thought in his mind about what Ian Bancroft, an early recruit to postwar Whitehall, would later call both the 'hardware' and the 'software' of state.⁵² To what use did he put it? In one area he excelled and, I think, remains unsurpassed. In his early 1930s 'Memorandum', just before his disquisition on 'architectonics', Attlee had written: 'The essential quality in a PM is that he should be a good Chairman able to get others to work. He must be able in the last resort to decide between competing policies.'⁵³ As Deputy Prime Minister in the War Cabinet he had been adept at planting his wasp-like sting in Churchill's ample frame when the old man had failed to live up to this requirement. 'A monologue is not a decision,' he told him on one occasion.⁵⁴ This is not to say that at certain times and on certain issues, especially economic ones (as during the sterling crisis of 1947 and 1949), something less than swift sure-footedness was observable beneath the PM's Chair in the Cabinet Room.⁵⁵ But, in the main, though 'he had a terribly difficult team to drive...he dominated them.'⁵⁶

As to the overall 'architectonics', there was a partial implementation of some of his pre-No.10 thinking but no more. Instead of that Treasury permanent secretary as 'chef de cabinet' in Downing Street, Attlee had Douglas Jay, a wartime temporary civil servant as his Economic Assistant until Jay was selected to fight the Battersea North by-election for Labour in 1946⁵⁷. Thereafter he had the services of a career civil

servant, William Gorell Barnes, as his 'Personal Assistant'⁵⁸ but, as George Jones noted, 'there was no political capacity in No.10 Downing Street to support the Prime Minister on a full-time basis...'⁵⁹ and Gorell Barnes was not replaced when he was posted to the Colonial Office in February 1948.

When it came to trimming the full Cabinet Attlee fell far short of his ideal of 10. He started out with 20 and never culled it below 16⁶⁰, despite a partial implementation of his 'overlords' plan during the first two years of his administration in the persons of Herbert Morrison on the economic front and Arthur Greenwood across the social services. Even though Morrison's and Greenwood's co-ordinating functions were largely channelled through Cabinet committees they chaired (the Lord President's Committee and the Social Services Committee respectively), there is no evidence that they added significantly to the efficiency of the Cabinet process; in Morrison's case quite the reverse as the Lord President's Committee was the leading casualty of the 1947 convertibility crisis being replaced by a new Economic Policy Committee, chaired by Attlee himself, from the autumn of that year⁶¹. Greenwood, a victim of drink and overwork, went into retirement altogether when Attlee's 'architectonics' were reshaped in September 1947.⁶²

Attlee always claimed that in his time the workload of the Prime Minister was 'heavy but not insupportable' and on one famous occasion fetched his own tea on the grounds that the No.10 messenger was 'probably busy'.⁶³ He made it his practice not to go up to the Prime Minister's Downing Street flat from the Cabinet Room until all his red boxes were cleared⁶⁴ and he slept the sleep of the just, telling his Ministers and officials not to take their problems to bed with them.⁶⁵ He probably ranks with Peel and Gladstone as the tidiest-minded men to have filled the office of Prime Minister.

But the overall picture was not so pleasingly orderly. That equally high and tidy-minded figure, Stafford Cripps, whom one might dub God's management consultant, was horrified on his return from the Cabinet Mission to India in 1946, to find an evermore sprawling Cabinet committee system overburdened by ever increasing trivia.⁶⁶ He persuaded Attlee to commission a review supervised by those great Whitehall titans, Sir Norman Brook and Sir Edward Bridges.⁶⁷ As a result Attlee circulated a terse Cabinet paper in September 1946 calling for 'a marked reduction in the number of problems put forward for discussion in Ministerial Committees.'⁶⁸

Yet over a year later still another minister with a filing-cabinet-of-a-mind, Hugh Gaitskell, could complain in his diary: 'Sometimes Cabinet meetings horrify me because of the amount of rubbish talked by some Ministers who come there after reading briefs which they do not understand. I do not know how this can be avoided except perhaps by getting more things settled at official level, and when they cannot be settled there having the issues presented plainly to Ministers. Also, I believe the Cabinet is too large. A smaller Cabinet, mostly of non-Departmental Ministers, would really be able to listen and understand more easily and hear the others arguing the matter out.'⁶⁹

Despite the strictures of Cripps and Gaitskell, and his own architectonic sense, Attlee failed to tackle what Correlli Barnett rightly called the 'administrative elephantiasis' of early postwar government.⁷⁰ It really was what Kenneth Wheare called 'government by committee'⁷¹ taken to extremes. Of course World War II had led to a huge explosion of committees despite Churchill's best efforts to curb them.⁷² Chamberlain's rather tight little system of five standing ministerial committees and eight ad hoc ministerial committees in the last days of peace⁷³ gave way to no fewer than 400 War Cabinet committees and sub-committees for which the Cabinet Office provided a secretariat at no fewer than 8000 meetings⁷⁴ (though, of course, they were not all in existence at the same time and not all of them were chaired by ministers).

The state never went back which is not entirely surprising given the range of responsibilities it kept and extended on the economic and social policy fronts. On the face of it Attlee's combined total over 6¼ years of 148 standing committees (both ministerial and official) and 313 ad hoc⁷⁵ reveals an uncharacteristic absence of architectonics even though, in the case of the ad hocs no less than 175 of them met on three or fewer occasions.⁷⁶

Even when it came to economic planning, Labour's 'big idea' in 1945,⁷⁷ it was more a case of improvise-as-you-go than architectonics-from-on-high. Though planning was supposed to be the superglue of the administration, it got lost in the structural morass. As late as December 1949, the Cabinet Office's Economic Section was still trying somehow to attach wires from Whitehall to the real economy in crucial areas like machine tools.⁷⁸ And from newly discovered files, unearthed by my research student, Keir Thorpe, we find officials as late as April 1951, 5½ years after Labour's victory, admitting how embarrassing it was to have to refer back in answers to parliamentary questions on planning to Attlee's speech setting up the Central Economic Planning Staff in March 1947.⁷⁹

There was, however, one area of crucial engine room activity where the wartime experience had brought a degree of clarity – the creation of war or near-war Cabinets. Attlee was adept at adapting the World War II model to fit particular contingencies such as the moment when the Berlin Airlift looked as if it might propel East and West into war,⁸⁰ the Persian Crisis of 1951,⁸¹ the Malayan Emergency⁸² and the exacting demands of the Korean War from June 1950.⁸³ As the cold war intensified after the North Korean invasion of the South, Attlee and Brook developed contingency plans for a World War III War Cabinet with the Prime Minister intending, Churchill-style, to assume the post of Minister of Defence within the premiership as the centrepiece of the what Brook called 'the machinery of supreme control in the event of war.'⁸⁴

The cold war generally led to a, so far, permanent peacetime extension in the job of Prime Minister and not just on the potential War Cabinet front. Those of you who attended my Gresham series last year may recall that I attempted to map the growing scope of the postwar premiership by extending the Whitehall job description drawn up for it between 1947 and 1949⁸⁵ and carrying it forward thereafter to the Major years.⁸⁶ I shan't attempt a reprise of all the ingredients of the job here, but, on the cold war side, I would single out three, though the first one, nuclear weapons, pre-dates Mr Attlee's incumbency and would, in terms of developing a separate British weapons-making capacity have almost certainly occurred anyway, cold war or no cold war.

The need to go-it-alone, however, after US collaboration was largely cut off when the Congress passed the McMahon Act in 1946 led to Attlee bringing policy-making within the Cabinet system, or certainly its committee sub-structure, even if he kept it away from the full Cabinet itself.⁸⁷

Allied to the nuclear element in international relations was the need to bring the contingency planning of the 'War Book' into line with the fearsome new reality. In addition to the creation of a substantial Civil Defence capacity under the 1948 Act,⁸⁸ Attlee was the first premier who had to plan for the continuation of the state when much of his beloved 'green and pleasant land' (he was a great one for Jerusalem which he arranged to have sung at his funeral⁸⁹) would, if the worst happened, be reduced to an irradiated and blackened ruin once the Soviet Union had acquired its own nuclear capacity. Recently released files show him in the last days of his 1950-51 government preparing to respond to intelligence warnings that the Russians might well now be in a position to smuggle in to Britain an atomic device in fifty small bits via their diplomatic bags piecing it together with the aid of skilled fitters in a garage somewhere in London with the result that the whole human apparatus of state might go sky high with no warning.⁹⁰ The other cold war-related area that was to absorb a good deal of the time of postwar premiers and which came to impinge in Attlee's time was the whole question of protecting the UK, especially its public and secret

services and weapons research establishments, from espionage. One of the few full sets of Cabinet committee minutes and papers that had to await the ending of the cold war (and then some) before they could see the light of day were those of the Committee on Subversive Activities, GEN 183, which Attlee himself chaired 1947-51.⁹¹

There were other areas, too, where the scope of existing prime ministerial functions waxed under Attlee (in fact it is hard to think of anything that waned apart from his dropping the peacetime practice of combining the Leadership of the House of Commons with the premiership, for all his distaste for what he called 'one-man Government'⁹²) He tightened up prime ministerial control over Cabinet procedure by consolidating and regularly updating the key document, Questions of Procedure for Ministers, from August 1945.⁹³ And the extending of the reach of the state through the nationalised industries and the expanded welfare apparatus meant a considerable growth in the flow of appointments and patronage that passed through No.10. (Though measurement is very difficult here as, to the best of my knowledge, this remains an under researched area as a whole).⁹⁴

But overall, the Attlee premiership turned out to be in its methods and its instruments a reflection of his profound small 'c' conservatism about the British way of government – his conviction, as he put it in the House of Commons in 1950, that 'the British have the distinction above all other nations of being able to put new wine into old bottles without bursting them.'⁹⁵ It could be, of course, that the sheer pressure of events, 'with crisis piled on crisis and no sign of letting up either at home or abroad', as Nye Bevan recalled,⁹⁶ meant that even Attlee was distracted from carrying through his plans for a streamlined Cabinet system, a more commercially and managerially minded public service or even a Civil Service College. Apart from attempts to curb Whitehall numbers, ministers including Attlee, left virtually all these matters to Bridges and his permanent secretary colleagues some of whom made progressive noises but no more.⁹⁷

His wartime writings had shown a profound devotion to 'the Westminster model' and the peculiar historical soil (our 'long history' of 'constitutionalism' was how he put it) that enabled the singular British way of governance to flourish.⁹⁸ Attlee believed in increased efficiency but within traditional procedures. Unlike Churchill he did not step into Number 10 feeling he was walking with destiny. ('I had not much idea about destiny', he said over 20 years later⁹⁹). Jim Callaghan said of him that: 'The secret of Attlee's success is that he never pretended to be anything other than himself – a cool judgement, a readiness to see the virtues of both sides of the argument – rarely critical of his colleagues in conversation. So he won the confidence of them all without ever becoming a faction fighter.'¹⁰⁰

He was a deeply reassuring figure and not just to his own side. A Conservative MP said of him at the height of his powers as Prime Minister that if Mr Attlee had got up in the House of Commons and announced 'The Revolution' it would have sounded like a change in a regional railway timetable.¹⁰¹ The point about Clem Attlee is that he had no intention of doing anything about either railway timetables or 'The Revolution'. He treated Britain's constitutional practice as if it were his beloved game of cricket. From his Haileybury days onwards he always aspired to play with a straight bat which is exactly what he did from the moment at his own count in the People's Palace in the Mile End Road on 26 July 1945¹⁰² when he realised Labour might win until the afternoon of 26 October 1951 when he called on George VI with his resignation.¹⁰³ Britain's most Left Wing Prime Minister was certainly the most understated and, perhaps, the most deeply, almost narrowly English figure ever to have occupied No.10. And therein lay much of his strength.

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'PREMIERSHIP' 2

'A SENSE OF ARCHITECTONICS': CLEMENT ATTLEE, 1945-51.

ENDNOTES.

1. Ben Pimlott (ed), The Political Diary of Hugh Dalton, 1918-40, (Cape, 1986), Diary entry for 26 November 1935, p.196.
2. Douglas Jay, Change and Fortune: A Political Record, (Hutchinson, 1980), p.135.
3. James Margach, The Anatomy of Power: An Enquiry into the Personality of Leadership, (W. H. Allen, 1979), p.52.
4. James Margach, The Abuse of Power: The War Between Downing Street and the Media from Lloyd George to James Callaghan, (W.H. Allen, 1978), pp.88-90.
5. James Margach, The Anatomy of Power, p.20.
6. Lord Jay made this judgement when delivering the 1983 Attlee Foundation Lecture.
7. Denis Healey, The Time of My Life, (Michael Joseph, 1989), p.153.
8. Peter Hennessy, Never Again: Britain 1945-51, (Vintage, 1993), p.56.
9. Lord Helsby, who became Attlee's Principal Private Secretary in 1947, gave this story to me. He had been given it by his predecessor, Sir Leslie Rowan. Conversation with Lord Helsby, 2 November 1976.
10. George Mallaby, From My Level: Unwritten Minutes, (Hutchinson, 1965), pp.60-1.
11. Douglas Jay, Change and Fortune, p.237.
12. Alistair Horne, Macmillan, 1957-1986, (Macmillan, 1989), p.160.
13. Alistair Horne, Macmillan, 1894-1956, (Macmillan, 1988), p.287.
14. Quoted unattributably in Peter Hennessy, Cabinet, (Blackwell, 1986), p.95. Since Lord Soames' death in 1987 I have felt free to attribute it.
15. Premiership: Lord Callaghan, BBC Radio 3, first broadcast on 24 August 1989.
16. James Callaghan, Time and Chance, (Collins, 1987), p.95.
- 17.
18. Conversation with Lord Tonybandy, Haileybury College, 21 September 1995. Wilson's style was that of providing a running commentary on his colleagues' views (private information) and he expected all his colleagues to have views however remote the issue might

be from their departmental responsibilities. Richard Marsh was especially funny about this. See Richard Marsh, Off the Rails,

19. See The Times, account of Attlee's unscripted address to the University of Oxford's Law Society in June 1957. 'Duty of Ruthless Sacking: "Stop Cabinet Talking"', The Times, 15 June 1957. I am very grateful to Stanley Martin (who was present and had, indeed, invited Attlee down to Oxford) for bringing this gem of an occasion to my attention.

20. Lord Grimond was speaking on The Reasonable Revolutionary, a programme made for BBC2 Television by Roy Hattersley and Jeremy Bennett to mark the centenary of Attlee's birth in 1983.

21. Personal observation.

22. Nigel Lawson, The View from No.11: Memoirs of a Tory Radical, (Bantam, 1992), p.19.

23. Nigel Lawson, The New Britain: The Tide of Ideas from Attlee to Thatcher, Centre for Policy Studies, February 1988 quoted in Peter Hennessy, (Whitehall, Fontana, 1990), p.724.

24. Paul Gore Booth, With Great Truth and Respect, (Constable, 1974), p.232.

25. Peter Hennessy and Andrew Arends, Mr Attlee's Engine Room: Cabinet Committee Structure and the Labour Government 1945-51, Strathclyde Papers on Government and Politics, No.26, Department of Politics, University of Strathclyde, 1983, p.28.

26. Attlee was out of office by this time. The news was conveyed to him at Westminster by David Hunt, one of the No.10 private secretaries: 'He was very deeply moved indeed, yes. He was crying. He was an outstanding example of the stiff upper lip — the upper class Englishman. He wouldn't have liked to admit he'd wept. But he certainly did wipe his eyes several times. I got him out of a meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party.' Interview with Sir David Hunt for the Wide Vision Productions/Channel 4 television series, What Has Become of Us?, 12 August 1993.

27. The origin of the 'Audience Notes' was explained to me by Lawrence Helsby. It had been explained to him by his predecessor as Principal Private Secretary in No.10, Leslie Rowan, at one of their hand-over sessions. Conversation with Lord Helsby, 2 November 1976. A set of Attlee's 'Audience Notes' has been declassified at the Public Record Office. See PRO, CAB 21/2263, 'Prime Minister's notes for weekly visits to the King, 1947-50.'

28. Conversation with Sir Edward Ford, 7 March 1994, for Wide Vision Productions' Channel 4 Television programme, What Has Become of Us? See also Peter Hennessy, 'The throne behind the power', The Economist, 24 December 1994 - 6 January 1995, p.33.

29.

30. Conversation with R.P. Fraser, 26 August 1993.

31. Mallaby, From My Level, p.59.

32. Francis Williams, A Prime Minister Remembers, (Heinemann, 1961), p.81.

33. He did it on one occasion to me. Conversation with Sir Harold Wilson, 19 October 1976.

34. Lord Wilson speaking on Attlee: The Reasonable Revolutionary.
35. Lord Strauss speaking on Attlee: The Reasonable Revolutionary.
36. Lord Wilson speaking on Attlee: The Reasonable Revolutionary.
37. 'Duty of Ruthless Sacking', The Times, 15 June 1957.
38. Harold Wilson, A Prime Minister on Prime Ministers, (Weidenfeld and Michael Joseph, 1977), p.296.
39. Kenneth Harris, Attlee, (Weidenfeld, 1982), pp.262-5; 347-50.
40. Alan Bullock, Ernest Bevin: Foreign Secretary, 1945-51, (Heinemann, 1983), pp.327-9.
41. Kenneth O. Morgan, Labour in Power, 1945-51, (OUP, 1984), pp.199-200.
42. Ibid. pp.75-9.
43. Peter Hennessy, Never Again, p.65; C.R. Attlee, As It Happened, (Odhams edition, 1954), p.171; Sir John W. Wheeler-Bennett, King George VI, His Life and Reign (Macmillan, 1958), p.638.
44. 'THE MEMORANDUM' 'written by me sometime in the 30s before I had had any actual experience of Cabinet' Attlee wrote in 1948 (Harris, Attlee, p.589) is reprinted as Appendix III, 'The Reorganization of Government' in Harris, Attlee, pp.589-93.
45. This was contained in the 'SHORT NOTE' Attlee wrote in 1932 on much the same theme. Harris, Attlee, pp.593-5.
46. C.R. Attlee, The Labour Party in Perspective, (Gollancz, 1937), p.175.
47. The paper is preserved in PRO, PREM 8/17, 'Civil Service (Organisation) 1945'. I am grateful to my former student, Chris Briggs, who brought this paper to my attention as part of the research for his MA in Contemporary British History at Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London. Its full title is MG (42) 6, 'War Cabinet, Committee on Machinery of Government'. Note by the Deputy Prime Minister', 31st December 1942.
48. Ibid.
49. See John Turner, Lloyd George's Secretariat, (CUP, 1980).
50. Harris, Attlee, pp.590-1.
51. PRO, PREM 8/17. 'Committee on Machinery of Government. Note by the Deputy Prime Minister. 31st December 1942.'
52. Quoted in Peter Hennessy, The Hidden Wiring: Unearthing the British Constitution, Gollancz, 1995, p.26.
53. Harris, Attlee, p.591.
54. Sir Antony Jay (ed) The Oxford Dictionary of Political Quotations, (OUP, 1996), p.

55. Peter Hennessy, Never Again, pp.303-5; pp.370-6.
56. Sir David Hunt speaking on What Has Become of Us? Part 1: Building Jerusalem, Channel 4 Television, 27 November 1994.
57. Jay, Change and Fortune, pp.128-56.
58. Sir William Gorell Barnes, Who's Who, 1981, (Adam and Charles Black, 1981), p.1014.
59. G.W. Jones, 'The Prime Ministers' Secretaries', in J.A.G. Griffith, (ed), From Policy to Administration: Essays in Honour of William A. Robson, (Allen and Unwin, 1976), p.34.
60. Trevor Burridge, Clement Attlee: A Political Biography, (Cape, 1985), p.187.
61. Peter Hennessy, Never Again, p.336.
62. Morgan, Labour in Power, p.355.
63. C.R. Attlee, The Office of Prime Minister, Municipal Review, March 1965; for the tea story see Douglas Jay, 'The Quiet Master at No.10', The Times, 26 April 1980.
64. Burridge, Clement Attlee, p.184.
65. Edwin Plowden, An Industrialist in the Treasury: The Post-War Years, (Andre Deutsch, 1989), p.109.
66. PRO, CAB 21/1701, 'Organisation of Cabinet Committees, 1946-47', Bridges to Brook, 5 July 1946.
67. See Peter Hennessy, Cabinet, (Blackwell, 1986), pp.38-45.
68. PRO, CAB 21/1702. CP (46)357: 'Cabinet Committees, note by the Prime Minister, 26 September 1946'.
69. Philip M. Williams (ed), The Diary of Hugh Gaitskell, 1945-1956, (Cape, 1983), p.36.
70. Correlli Barnett, The Lost Victory: British Dreams and British Realities 1945-1950, (Macmillan, 1995), p.190.
71. Kenneth Wheare,
72. S.S. Wilson, The Cabinet Office to 1945, (HMSO, 1975), p.121.
73. PRO, CAB 21/481, 'Cabinet, Composition of Cabinet Committees.' CP125 (39), Composition of Cabinet Committees, Note by the Secretary.'
74. Wilson, The Cabinet Office to 1945, pp.95-6.
75. Peter Hennessy and Andrew Arends, Mr. Attlee's Engine Room: Cabinet Committee Structure and the Labour Governments 1945-51, Strathclyde Papers on Government and Politics, No. 26, Department of Politics, (University of Strathclyde, 1983), Appendix I.

76. Peter Hennessy, 'The Statecraft of Clement Attlee', The Thirteenth Annual Attlee Foundation Lecture delivered at Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London, 14 February 1995.
77. See Labour's manifesto, Let Us Face the Future, (Labour Publications Department, 1945) for example pp.6-7.
78. PRO, T 229/208, R.F.Bretherton to Robert Hall, 1 December 1949.
79. PRO, T 229/778, Douglas Henley to D.A.V. Allen, 25 April 1951.
80. The ministerial group was called the Committee on Germany and listed as GEN 241 in the Cabinet Committee Book. See PRO, CAB 21/1885. I am very grateful to my former student, Roger Schindler, for the material he mined at the PRO while preparing his undergraduate thesis on 'Cabinet Government and Conflict: An Assessment of the Attlee Administrations' "War" and Near War Cabinet Committees', Department of History, Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London, 1995.
81. For the Persia Committee, GEN 363, see PRO, CAB 130/67.
82. For the genesis of the Malaya Committee, MALC, see PRO, CAB 21/2510.
83. For an excellent summary of Attlee's use of his standing Defence Committee for the handling of the Korean War see Colin Seymour-Ure, 'British "War Cabinets" in limited wars: Korea, Suez and the Falklands,' Public Administration, vol 62, No.2 (Summer, 1984), pp.181-200.
84. PRO, CAB 21/1647. 'Draft of a submission to be made to the Prime Minister.'
85. PRO, CAB 21/1638, 'Function of the Prime Minister and his staff.' For my extensions to the 1949 version see Peter Hennessy, The Hidden Wiring: Unearthing the British Constitution, Gollancz, 1995, pp.86-7.
86. For my mid 1990s version see *ibid*, pp.88-90.
87. See Hennessy, Cabinet, pp.123-34.
- 88.
89. Every item of it was repeated in Service of Commemoration which I attended at Haileybury to celebrate the 50th anniversary of its famous old boy forming his Government (Haileybury College, 21 September 1995).
90. PRO, PREM 8/1547. See especially Sir Norman Brook's 'Top Secret' brief for the Prime Minister on 'Clandestine Use of Atomic Weapons', 12 July 1951.
91. See Peter Hennessy and Gail Brownfeld, 'Britain's Cold War Security Purge, The Origins of Positive Vetting', The Historical Journal, vol 25, No.4 (1982), pp.965-74. For the GEN 183 archive see PRO, CAB 134.
92. Lord Attlee, 'Premier and His Team: Advantages over Presidential System', The Daily Telegraph, 9 August 1960.

93. For the genesis and development of Questions of Procedure for Ministers in its modern form see Hennessy, The Hidden Wiring, pp.32, 34-41, 102-5, 186-91, 195-96.
94. I made an attempt to map one part of it, the increased use of royal commissions and committees of inquiry in my The Good and the Great: An Inquiry Into the British Establishment, (Policy Studies Institute, 1985).
95. Jay (ed) The Oxford Dictionary of Political Quotations, p.
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97. PRO, T 222/21. I am grateful to my former student, Chris Briggs, for bringing this file to my attention.
98. PRO,CAB 118/32, WP (43) 199, 'The Application of Democratic Principles of Government: Memorandum by the Deputy Prime Minister', 11 May 1943.
99. Clem Attlee, Granada Historical Records, (Granada, 1967), p.29.
100. Lord Callaghan, Message to Haileybury College on the occasion of its celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of Attlee's accession to the Premiership, 21 September 1995. I am very grateful to Dan Hearn, President of the Haileybury Political Society, for sending me a copy.
101. Burridge, Clement Attlee, p.2.
102. Roy Jenkins, Mr Attlee: An Interim Biography, (Heinemann, 1948), p.257.
103. Sir John Wheeler-Bennett, King George VI: His Life and Reign, (Macmillan, 1958), p.796.

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