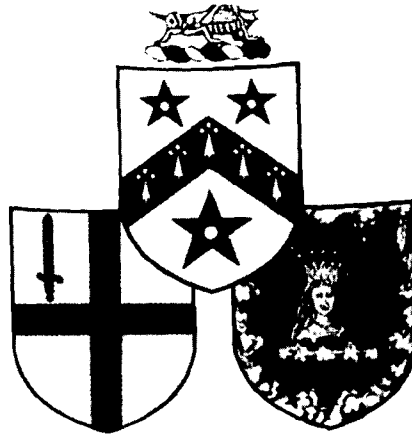


G R E S H A M

University of Cambridge COLLEGE



PREMIERSHIP

Lecture 7

‘IN HISTORY LIE ALL THE SECRETS’:
WINSTON CHURCHILL, 1951-55

by

PROFESSOR PETER HENNESSY BA PhD
Gresham Professor of Rhetoric

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Of all the postwar Prime Ministers, Winston Churchill was the patron of my craft. He was a natural contemporary historian. For him past, present and future were in constant and living symbiosis one with another. He lived, acted, thought and dreamt historically. As Paul Addison put it: 'To Churchill the past was alive and Whig history was true.'¹ And Churchill was convinced that the great mass of the British people thought and breathed history as he did.

One of the most colourful and over-egged minutes of his final, 'recidivist'², 'Indian Summer'³ premiership, was stimulated by a letter from Sir Vincent Tewson, the General Secretary of the TUC, complaining about a cut of £25,000 in the Ministry of Education's grant to the Workers' Educational Association and university extra-mural departments.

Churchill had a fondness for trade union leaders of the non-communist, social patriot variety⁴, the clones (if such a thing is conceivable) of the protean Ernest Bevin, his cherished companion in the War Cabinet of 1940-45. Tewson's concerns were taken very seriously and a furious philippic was dispatched from No.10 to the hapless Education Minister, Florence Horsbrugh.

There is perhaps no branch of our vast educational system which should more attract within its particular sphere the aid and encouragement of the State than adult education. How many must there be in Britain, after the disturbance of two destructive wars, who thirst in later life to learn about the humanities, the history of their country, the philosophies of the human race, and the arts and letters which sustain and are borne forward by the ever-conquering English language? This ranks in my opinion far above science and technical instruction, which are well sustained and not without their rewards in our present system. The mental and moral outlook of free men studying the past with free minds in order to discern the future demands the highest measures which our hard-pressed finances can sustain. I have no doubt myself that a man or woman earnestly seeking in grown-up life to be guided to wide and suggestive knowledge in its largest and most uplifted sphere will make the best

of all the pupils in this age of clatter and buzz, of gape and gloat. The appetite of adults to be shown the foundation and processes of thought will never be denied by a British Administration cherishing the continuity of our Island life.⁵

And what did this florid outburst produce? A trimming of the proposed cut from £25,000 to £15,000!⁶

Churchill gloried in a constitution sculpted by the singular history of his country and rejoiced in leading a people, as he put it, 'content with their system of government, ...[and]...proud as they have a right to be of their race and name.'⁷ He was convinced, too, as he told a young American schoolboy in 1953, that 'In history lie all the secrets of statecraft?'⁸

Churchill's sense of history and his appetite for adventure were always too great to make him a monogamist in party terms. He 'was a politician without a permanent address', as Paul Addison put it so succinctly.⁹ And in his final deep, political maturity in mid-twentieth century Britain he tried to create in both party terms and in his governing style a special, highly personal approach to national and international politics that transcended the sectional and the trivial.

Roy Jenkins captured this in all its grandeur and its absurdity when he revisited the grand old man's final phase in Downing Street some 40 years on. 'It is impossible', Jenkins wrote,

to re-read the story of Churchill's life as Prime Minister of that second government without feeling that he was gloriously unfit for office. The oxymoron is appropriate to the contradiction in his performance. The splendor of his personality, which infused everything he did with style and interest, was not in doubt. He put on a great show. Indeed there is a constant feeling that he was asking all his interlocutors, the new Queen, President Eisenhower, his ageing crown prince Anthony Eden, the members of the House of Commons, and various insecure Prime Ministers of the Fourth French Republic to live up

to a role which they thought was a little over the top for the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century.¹⁰

With the exception, Jenkins continued, of saving the world from nuclear catastrophe (both superpowers acquired the hydrogen bombs during his last premiership and Churchill set Britain's own thermonuclear programme in motion in response), too much of Churchill's

attention, in Jean Monnet's distinction, was concentrated as "being someone" rather than "doing something" The struggle to prolong active life became dominant over any policy issue except for the nuclear one. The most important milestones in his political year were the occasions when he would endeavour to show the Cabinet or the Americans, the Conservative Conference, or the House of Commons, that he was fit to carry on. It was not so much what he said on these occasions, although he maintained his habit of meticulous preparation, as the fact that he was able to keep on his feet for sufficiently long to say it at all. There was even an element of play-acting about it.¹¹

One has to be careful of overdoing the depiction of the old warrior as a kind of walking off licence-cum-pharmacy in his final premiership (though his stroke in June 1953 left him severely diminished in terms of energy, concentration and grip and from the biographer of his doctor, Lord Moran, we now know some detail of the amphetamines - or 'Morans' as Churchill called them - that he took to give himself a boost before key speeches¹²). But the key insight into his last term of office is contained in the final section of Roy Jenkins' description of it.

The most vivid moments of the second premiership were in the bustle of his returning to office: putting together the government, summoning officials, re-creating his staff, sending or acknowledging greetings all over the world. It was as least as much a pageant to commemorate the great days of the first government as it was a realistic preparation for a new period of office.¹³

And this pageant-of-a-premiership, with that other great little Victorian, Clem Attlee, bristling Captain Mainwaring-like across the despatch box, must also be seen in its context of the last flowering of a style of government and politics which began with Mr Gladstone's Midlothian Campaign and finished when what Harold Macmillan called the 'hot pitiless, probing eye'¹⁴ of television began to usher in the electronic age usurping the great set speech and the elaborate unfolding of political argument from the 1955 general election onwards in a process that has still to run its course even in our deeply sound-bitten nation.

The rich flavours of Churchill's peacetime premiership came out very strongly in the hours that followed his acceptance of the King's commission to form a government on 26 October 1951 a few days before his 77th birthday. Jock Colville, one of the first of the wartime entourage to be summoned back to the colours as Joint Principal Private Secretary in No.10 alongside David Pitblado, who the old man inherited from Attlee ('I must have somebody I know', Churchill insisted when Colville attempted to decline¹⁵), sensed that Auld Lang Syne was ringing out along the Whitehall corridors.'¹⁶

Indeed it was. Churchill wanted as many of his old wartime team with him as possible. He couldn't get Lord Portal, the former Chief of the Air Staff, to accept the Ministry of Defence so he persuaded the King and the Canadians to release Field Marshal Lord Alexander from the Governor-Generalship in Ottawa.¹⁷ 'Pug' Ismay, his indispensable link-man with the chiefs of staff throughout the wartime premiership, was summoned from his bed at night and offered the Commonwealth Relations Office.¹⁸ Lord Cherwell, 'the Prof', returned to head his private think-tank, the Statistical Section, and to run atomic energy policy with the sinecure title of Paymaster-General.¹⁹ And Churchill was determined to recreate a version of the War Cabinet by placing a layer of 'co-ordinating' or 'supervising' ministers between him and various clusters of departmental ministers in the teeth of detailed and reasoned argument from his highly esteemed Cabinet Secretary, Sir Norman Brook, that this

was undesirable, unnecessary and inefficient in peacetime conditions.²⁰ (This is a question we shall return to later not least because there are those in the current shadow cabinet, John Prescott especially, who have been playing variation in this theme as the general election draws closer.²¹).

Churchill's passion for recreating his glory days was partly due to an old man's craving for the familiar and simply to his being too tired to contemplate new faces (especially when he could rarely put names to them).²² Partly, too, it stemmed from a misguided sense that the senior Civil Service had become Clem Attlee's possession. As Colville wrote later

When Churchill returned as Prime Minister in 1951, he had long since reached the age at which new faces are unpalatable. He inherited Mr Attlee's Private Secretaries. Arriving at 10 Downing Street with Sir Norman Brook he flung open the door connecting the Cabinet Room to the Private Secretaries' Offices...He gazed at them, closed the door without saying a word, shook his head and proclaimed to Norman Brook: 'Drenched in Socialism.'²³

Sensibly none of them were purged. But, given the impossibility of getting Leslie Rowan back from the Treasury, Colville was commandeered from the Foreign Office.²⁴ In another strong echo of 1940, Churchill assumed the title of Minister of Defence until Alexander returned from Canada.²⁵ In a ludicrous rerun of 1940, the Home Guard was also reconstituted in case Stalin's paratroops succeeded where Hitler had failed.²⁶ And Churchill's bizarre wartime administrative habits returned too.

He would work deep into the night reading the first editions of the national newspapers and firing off biting minutes to unbriefed ministers on whatever claims the Daily Express and the other papers might be making about the people's diet or housing in particular ('I get far more out of them than the official muck' he said when reproached for this). He refrained, however, from attaching his famous red 'Action This Day' labels to these broadsides even though the No.10 messengers had carefully put them back on the Cabinet Table on the day of his restoration.²⁷

For all his obsession with the nation's alimentary canal, Churchill had not the faintest idea about the rationing régime under which the King's subjects still lived in the autumn of 1951. Harold Macmillan, who was put in charge of the economically and industrially foolish drive to build 300,000 houses a year, has the wonderful story of the Minister of Food, Gwilym Lloyd George, being summoned to brief the great trencherman on rationing as the PM found the figures confusing. Lloyd George arranged a mock-up. 'This exhibit duly appeared', wrote Macmillan,

on a large tin dish – a painted piece of meat, a little heap of sugar and the rest. The Prime Minister looked at it with some satisfaction.

'Not a bad meal,' he said. 'Not a bad meal.'

'But these', cried the Minister, 'are not rations for a meal or for a day. They are for a week.'

'A week!' was the outraged reply. 'Then the people are starving. It must be remedied.'²⁸

Often the minister at the receiving end of an outraged minute would be summoned to the bedside of the PM the following morning to explain himself.

There, unless the Cabinet or a Cabinet committee he chaired was due to meet, Churchill would lie until shortly before lunch, an unlit cigar in his mouth, his bed covered in papers, a 'Garden Girl' beside it to take dictation. At his feet would be Rufus the poodle whose malodorous breath was likened to a flame-thrower. On his head sat Toby the constantly twittering budgerigar.²⁹ Toby, for some reason, was particularly excited by the presence of 'Rab' Butler, the Chancellor of the Exchequer. If 'Rab' was briefing Churchill on the latest strains on the economy, Toby would fly round the room, occasionally opening his bowels on 'Rab's' head. According to one

of the private secretaries, Anthony Montague Browne, Toby found Chancellor's bald head an irresistible target as well as a perch. On one occasion Butler was seen to mop his head 'with a spotless silk handkerchief' and heard to sigh resignedly, 'The things I do for England...'³⁰

These working sessions were sandwiched between a nine-o'clock English breakfast in bed with cold grouse or partridge if in season and a whisky and soda.³¹ Lunch at 1:30 would be laced with 'enough champagne and brandy...to incapacitate any lesser man', as Colville put it.³² In the late afternoon Churchill would take a nap often in his room at the House of Commons. Lord Plowden remembers briefing him there one afternoon in the spring of 1954 to the effect that Britain did have the resources to make its own hydrogen bomb. 'We must do it', he said. 'It's the price we pay for sitting at the top table.' 'And', Lord Plowden continued, 'having said that, he got up and tied a little black ribbon round his eyes, and lay down on his bed in his room and went to sleep.'³³

Quite often Churchill would return to No.10 for the nap which, in a way, was the fulcrum of his day-and-night work routine. 'Undressed fully to his nightwear of a long silk vest, he would take a very small sleeping pill and go to bed for one or two hours awaking refreshed and ready for dinner or work.'³⁴ When he went to bed properly he rarely had a sleepless night, (he could remember only two from the war – when the Repulse and the Prince of Wales went down and when Crete fell³⁵). 'I just turn out the light, say "bugger everyone", and go to sleep', he once explained to an inquisitive private secretary³⁶. All in all, it was a rich, eccentric, selfish (in terms of its demands on the time of ministers and officials) and shamelessly personal way of heading a government and it was matched by an equally idiosyncratic attitude towards party politics – a very 'broad gauge' approach, to borrow a phrase of Clive Priestley's.³⁷

It is well known both that Churchill wished the wartime coalition to continue into the peace in 1945³⁸ and that he tried very hard to place the Liberal Leader, Clement Davies, in his October 1951 Cabinet as Minister of Education.³⁹ He wanted Asquith's son, Cyril, in too as his Lord Chancellor⁴⁰ and he had spoken personally for the Liberal candidate for Colne Valley in the 1951 election, Asquith's daughter the

magnificent Lady Violet Bonham-Carter, at a meeting in Huddersfield where he shared the platform with his old friend.⁴¹ In March 1950 he had proposed a select committee on electoral reform to the consternation of Conservative Central Office and in September that year he suggested to the Conservative backbench 1922 Committee that the Conservatives make way for the Liberals in between 20 and 40 seats, a proposal that 'was greeted with silence'.⁴²

Such forbearance, naturally, was not forthcoming towards Labour. But, despite some of his platform rhetoric, he was relatively benign in his attitude towards early postwar Labour and he could be funny about their dull respectability. In 1947 Churchill invented an intriguing way of conveying his reflections on the changes experienced over his already long political life. In 'The Dream' he imagined that while painting his father's portrait at Chartwell, Lord Randolph appeared in the armchair beside his easel. After an exchange on the monarchy and the church, Randolph asks

'What party is in power now? Liberals or Tories?

'Neither, Papa. We have a Socialist Government, with a very large majority...

'Socialist!' he exclaimed. 'But I thought you said we still have a Monarchy'.

'The Socialists are quite in favour of the Monarchy, and make generous provisions for it.'

'You mean in regard to Royal grants, the Civil List, and so forth? How can they get those through the Commons?'

‘Of course they have a few rebels, but the old Republicanism of Dilke and Labby [that’s Labouchere] is dead as mutton. The Labour men and the trade unions look upon the Monarchy not only as a national but a nationalized institution. They even go to the parties at Buckingham Palace. Those who have very extreme principles wear sweaters’...

‘What have they done?’

‘Not much. They have nationalized the mines and railways and a few other services, paying full compensation. You know, Papa, though stupid, they are quite respectable, and increasingly bourgeois. They are not nearly so fierce as the old Radicals, though of course they are wedded to economic fallacies.’⁴³

During his last premiership Churchill’s relationship with Attlee was respectful rather than close, its cordiality punctured by occasional eruptions sometimes occasioned by Churchill’s appetite for fashioning defence secrets into a weapon and hurling them across the Chamber of the House of Commons as in April 1954 when he claimed that Labour had abandoned the 1943 Quebec Agreement on atomic collaboration.⁴⁴ On one issue – an intriguing and important if understudied one for students of the British premiership – Churchill eventually admitted Attlee’s criticism, which the Leader of the Opposition had sustained over nearly two years had a point. This was on the matter of those ‘overlord ministers.

Churchill was warned off the idea the moment he returned to No.10 in the briefing notes on the ‘structure of government’ which the Cabinet Secretary had prepared ready for a Conservative restoration. Sir Norman Brook was much better primed on Churchill’s intentions than some of the intended ‘supervising ministers’ as Brook called them.⁴⁵ John Anderson, Churchill’s wartime Lord President and Chancellor of the Exchequer, when summoned to Chartwell was both shocked by and dismissive of the idea that he become Chancellor of the Duchy and, in the words of his biographer, ‘surprising “Overlord” of the Treasury, the Board of Trade and the Ministry of Supply.’⁴⁶ ‘John was both shocked and amazed’, continued Sir John Wheeler-Bennett.

The concept of 'overlords' in Government was entirely contrary to his beliefs and principles, both as a former Minister and as a former Civil Servant.

Though, in a sense, he had occupied an analogous position when Lord President of the Council, this had been a wartime emergency and, in any case, he had been concerned with co-ordinating rather than supervising the activities of the various agencies placed within his aegis. Such a position, he felt, could have no place in the peacetime organization of government.⁴⁷

Those words 'supervising' and 'co-ordinating' are critical and I want to return to them in a moment. Continuing his summary of Anderson's objections, Wheeler-Bennett added: 'There were Government Departments which were responsible to Ministers, and there were Ministers who answered for their Departments to the House of Commons. This was the established order of things. It was inconceivable to him to have another Minister, floating around, as it were, above these Departments and Ministers with no fixed responsibility for either. To John the proposed arrangement would prove intolerable, nor did he think it could possible work, and he said as much to the Prime Minister.'⁴⁸ It is a measure of Churchill's determination, as Anthony Montague Browne put it, 'to have his "Overlords" and the people he knew well and trusted, such as Lord Cherwell, to advise him',⁴⁹ that he overrode the advice both of the highly respected Anderson (whom he likened to the 'automatic pilot'⁵⁰) and Anderson's wartime protégé, Norman Brook, on whom Churchill came to rely very heavily in his last spell in No.10.

Brook's objections to the 'supervising ministers' concept were very similar to Anderson's. It, was, he warned Churchill in the brief that was waiting for him in 26 October 1951, 'fraught with serious difficulties both constitutional and practical' because it was difficult to reconcile with individual ministerial responsibility, it was inconsistent with the principle that policy should be formulated by those with the responsibility for carrying out, it rested on the assumption that policy could be divorced from administration, it was contrary to the traditions of Cabinet government that one Cabinet minister should be subordinate to another, supervising ministers would be served by civil servants whose knowledge was less than that possessed by

officials working to subordinate ministers, and, finally, all outside bodies would seek to influence the overlord rather than the overlorded (I paraphrase). It would be much better to strive for co-ordination through standing Cabinet committees of the kind he, Churchill, had developed in the war and which Mr Attlee had maintained in the peace.⁵¹

This is not the place to pick over the pieces of what Attlee called this 'very ill-starred experiment',⁵² though the subject of the 'overlords' cries out for detailed, scholarly treatment. What is of interest, particularly in the context of Mr Prescott's reported appetite for an 'overlordship', is to draw any lessons from the two-year period between Churchill's return to power and the autumn of 1953 when the 'experiment' ended and Churchill grudgingly accepted Attlee's criticisms explaining to the House of Commons that

I had no experience of being Prime Minister in time of peace and I attached more importance to the grouping of Departments so that the responsible head of the Government would be able to deal with a comparatively smaller number of heads than actually exists in peacetime. I think we had great advantage...from the services of the three noble Lords, who did their very utmost to help forward the public service.⁵³

The first problem is who were the noble Lords? Two are beyond dispute – Lord Woolton who as Lord President was responsible for co-ordinating the then separate ministries of agriculture and food) and Lord Leathers, (who was dubbed the Secretary of State for the Co-ordination of Transport, Fuel and Power).

R.S. Milne in an article written over 40 years ago concentrated on these two when examining what he described as 'The experiment with "co-ordinating ministers" between 1951 and 1953'.⁵⁴

There are several candidates for third or fourth or fifth or sixth slots, as my research student, David Welsh, has pointed out: Cherwell (Paymaster-General), Swinton (Chancellor of the Duchy and Minister of Materials), Salisbury (Lord Privy Seal) and Alexander at Defence.⁵⁵

For today's purposes I shall concentrate on the pair that are included in everybody's list – Woolton and Leathers. And they were the duo on whom Churchill focussed in his House of Commons statement on 'Co-ordinating Ministers' in May 1952, when, heavily reliant on Norman Brook's brief,⁵⁶ he tried to portray their appointment as a refinement-cum-extension of the co-ordinating powers exercised by the Lord Presidents during the Second World War (chiefly Anderson and Attlee) and by Herbert Morrison in Attlee's own administration. 'The responsibilities assigned under the present Government to Lord Woolton and Lord Leathers', Churchill explained,

'carry this development a stage further in one respect, and in one respect only, viz. that the specific, area of co-ordination assigned to each of them was publicly announced on his appointment. Indeed, so far as concerns ...Lord Leathers, it was explicit in his title. Coal, gas, electricity, oil and transport represent a homogeneous group of subjects which call for co-ordination...'⁵⁷

partly because they embraced a swathe of activities nationalized by the Attlee government.

On the constitutional side, there was no difference between the functions of Leathers and Woolton, Churchill insisted as he launched into a fine piece of circle-squaring. 'The co-ordinating ministers have no statutory powers', he declared

‘They have, in particular no power to give orders or directions to a Departmental Minister. A Departmental Minister who is invited by a co-ordinating Minister to adjust a Departmental policy to accord with the wider interests of the Government as a whole [some glorious weasel wording there] always has access to the Cabinet and, if he then finds that he cannot win the support of his Ministerial colleagues he should accept their decision. No Departmental Minister can, of course, be expected to remain in a Government and carry out policies with which he disagrees.

‘Thus, the existence and activities of these co-ordinating Ministers do not impair or diminish the responsibility to Parliament of the Departmental Ministers whose policies they co-ordinate...’⁵⁸

There is more in this vein but I fear I may lose your attention as I suspect Churchill probably lost the House’s in May 1952.

Detailed research needs to be directed towards what Leathers and Woolton actually did and how effective they were. This would be far more useful to any future Prime Minister tempted to resurrect the idea of ‘overlords’ than any constitutional theocratics. In his PhD thesis on Woolton, Michael Kandiah thought him ‘arguably the most successful of the Overlords, but this was probably because the Ministers he was to co-ordinate [Food and Agriculture] were related, and because he attempted to maintain only light control – he told the House of Lords [in April 1952] his task was “indeed a very minor one”.’⁵⁹ In other words, Woolton was a co-ordinating minister rather than a supervising one.

Leathers, on the other hand, was much more interventionist and, as my research student Chas Loft has found in his research on railway policy, an intervener to no good effect (almost certainly the reverse) during the preparation of what became the

Transport Act 1953 which broke up, amongst other things, the British Transport Commission's monopoly on long distance public road haulage. Strangely enough the Cabinet Committee Churchill set up to prepare the White Paper on transport was chaired by Woolton, not Leathers.⁶⁰

Norman Brook, ever sensitive to the harmful effect of blurring chains of command, attempted to persuade Churchill in April 1952 that responsibility for supervising the progress of the resultant Bill 'should be squarely placed on a Minister of Transport who has strong powers of decision and liberty to go ahead with the minimum amount of consultation with his colleagues...the preparation of a complicated bill in a hurry is really a matter for one man.'⁶¹ Churchill ignored this advice and Leathers was put in the chair of the Cabinet committee commissioned to oversee the Bills preparation. Chaos resulted. The minister, Alan Lennox-Boyd, and the 'Overlord', Leathers, put forward opposing positions and the Cabinet eventually and hurriedly had to decide between two competing draft bills. To make matters worse, Leathers' position seemed to be closer to the thinking of Lennox-Boyd's Ministry of Transport officials than Boyd's own.⁶²

So far from relieving the burden of detail weighing down full Cabinet, the Leathers-Boyd spat actually added to it. Leathers, who was not a career politician and was a details man rather than a broad picture person,⁶³ always felt an outsider in Churchill's last Cabinet and was glad to go when Churchill ended his 'overlord' experiment in September 1953. Churchill told Moran shortly before the announcement: 'The Overlords are going. Leathers has wanted to resign for a long time. I only kept him by calling him a deserter.'⁶⁴

Why was Churchill so keen on keeping his overlords until he reluctantly admitted the validity of Attlee's criticism that they were unsuited to peacetime Cabinet government?⁶⁵ The Auld Lang Syne factor was certainly part of it as was his desire, as he told the Commons, 'to deal [as Head of Government] with a comparatively smaller number of heads' than usually exists in peacetime.⁶⁶ Paul Addison reckons that 'The

“Overlords” were an interesting experiment, in trying to co-ordinate areas of policy in which he perhaps didn’t feel entirely confident himself.’⁶⁷

I suspect there is something in this. Even before his stroke in the summer of 1953 he showed a marked reluctance to take solo decisions. His natural romanticism about the Cabinet in the governing scheme of things was reinforced by his desire to ease his own burden by sharing it. Sir David Hunt, who spanned the change of government in No.10 in the autumn of 1951, was revealing about this when I interviewed him for the Wide Vision/Channel 4 What Has Become of Us? television series. ‘Plenty of people’, he recalled,

‘would come to me and say: “Oh, you must see a great change between the two Prime Ministers that you’ve been serving” And I would say: “On, a tremendous change. You simply can’t imagine the difference between them. On the one hand, a man decisive, quick, looks at a question, says ‘yes’ or ‘no’ and passes on to the next question. And on the other hand, there’s a man who will say: ‘Oh, I’m not going to decide that at the moment. That’s an important question. It must come to Cabinet.” Or sometimes he’ll say: “I won’t look at that now. Bring it down to Chartwell at the weekend. ”’

Not until David Hunt mentioned Chartwell would his listeners appreciate this tale of the unexpected. ‘All of a sudden they would discover that Attlee was a man who was good at decisions and Churchill much preferred putting them off.’⁶⁸

This desire to take matters to the full Cabinet had its advantages. During the war Churchill declined to consult even the Service Ministers let alone his War Cabinet about the development of the atomic bomb.⁶⁹ During his twilight premiership he consulted the full Cabinet no fewer than three times about the next, awesome step to a thermonuclear weapon,⁷⁰ a degree of consultation which only Harold Macmillan has come close to matching in subsequent years.⁷¹

There was one great policy exception to this pattern of premiership – the search for peace driven by the fear of that same H bomb Churchill thought vital for Britain herself to possess and his consciousness after the death of Stalin both of the opportunity for a rapprochement that might end the cold war and of his own solo survival in office of the 'Big Three' who met at Yalta in early 1945 in an attempt to sustain wartime co-operation in to the peace. Here Churchill disdained his heir apparent, Anthony Eden, as having become 'Foreign Officeism', of having gone native on a department he (Churchill) denounced as 'A cowardly lot of shuffling scuttlers.'⁷²

Here his fastidiousness about the niceties of Cabinet government deserted him. His pursuit of personal diplomacy by telegram with the post-Stalin Russian leadership while aboard the Queen Elizabeth returning from discussions with Eisenhower led to a series of acrimonious Cabinet meetings in July 1954 in which hints of resignation were made from a number of figures and not just that habitual resigner, 'Bobbety' Salisbury, if the old man did not defer to the Cabinet's collective scepticism about the wisdom of his desire for an imminent summit.⁷³ Eventually, Malenkov ended the triangular debate between Ike-Winston and the Churchill Cabinet by proposing a conference of all European governments instead of a summit of the great powers. As Martin Gilbert commented, 'Churchill's last great foreign policy initiative was at an end.'⁷⁴

Anthony Montague Browne told me of the poignant footnote to the greatest setback of the last Churchill premiership. 'He wanted to be seen as the peacemaker. When he got the Nobel Prize for Literature [in 1953 for his war memoirs] I told him that he'd been awarded the Nobel Prize and he was frightfully excited. Sat up. And I added "for literature". And his face fell. He'd wanted the Nobel Peace Prize.'⁷⁵

The episode of the summit – that-never-was did nothing to raise Eden's standing in Churchill's eyes and his final burst of vacillation in the spring of 1955 over vacating the premiership for him used the possibility of 'some exceptional invitation or prospect of a summit' to postpone what daughter, Mary Soames, called his 'first

death',⁷⁶ even though Conservative Party managers were itching to complete the succession, as Churchill well knew, in time for an early election.⁷⁷

What is one to make of the pageant premiership? Some aspects of it still have the capacity to amaze. The ability as late as the summer of 1953 of a small group of Churchill courtiers to keep the seriousness of his stroke out of the press and to run a kind of surrogate government for him while he recovered during the summer recess and the willingness of the Cabinet, the acting-PM 'Rab' Butler particularly, to put up with it is quite extraordinary to modern eyes.⁷⁸ And had Churchill died within days of their doctoring the medical bulletin,⁷⁹ this same inner circle (especially Colville, Brook and Churchill's son-in-law and Parliamentary Private Secretary, Christopher Soames) were party to a scheme whereby the Palace would have invited Lord Salisbury to form a caretaker administration for six months until Eden had recovered from his operation in America.⁸⁰

On the level of high policy who can blame Churchill for devoting his fading energies to trying to engineer in 1953 that crucial easement in east-west relations which took place over 30 years later and was the prelude to the ending of the cold war? He was, after all, the first British Prime Minister to have his hands on a droppable nuclear weapon (the first 'Blue Danube' atomic bomb was delivered to the Royal Air Force in November 1953⁸¹ – an extraordinary thing for a man who had fought at Omdurman⁸²).

On other aspects of his country's geopolitical position he was less farsighted. He could not bear the idea of disposing of parts of the British Empire, not even the base in the Suez Canal Zone.⁸³ European integration, his great late 1940s theme, was something he meant for them (i.e. Europe) not for us (the UK)⁸⁴ The British economy baffled him in the early 1950s even more than it had when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer 20 years earlier. When appointing John Boyd-Carpenter Financial Secretary to the Treasury in 1951 he said 'I was Chancellor of the Exchequer...for five years and...I never understood it.'⁸⁵

His glorious presence in No.10 distracted his fellow country men and women from the realities of their position too. He was still providing for them what Tom Harrisson so marvellously described as 'a sort of intellectual deep shelter' of the kind he had constructed during the war⁸⁶ - an effect powerfully enhanced, especially in Coronation Year, by what Ben Pimlott calls 'the most visible...contrast of all, between youth and innocence and age and experience. The juxtaposition of the angelic sovereign and the cherubic premier delighted the public...[as]...It also seemed to delight the incorrigibly - and, as he got older - increasingly sentimental Winston Churchill, who took a very personal pleasure, in his weekly audience with a young Queen who knew so little, and had so much to learn.'⁸⁷

He clung on to the premiership for too long perhaps because he thought he might die if he relinquished it and because he grew more and more worried about Eden's lack of prime ministerial fibre. (On his last night in No.10 he told Colville: 'I don't believe Anthony can do it'⁸⁸) Was he deluded about his country's predicament as a fast fading great power. Churchill used to remark during his last premiership: 'You can not ignore the facts for they glare upon you.'⁸⁹ Those hard facts may have glared upon him but he was too old, too tired and too bereft of new ideas to begin to reflect the consequences of their unforgiving dazzle. And yet there was a glow about that last premiership, a generosity of spirit that was Churchill's version of consensus. The Cabinet Room seemed a smaller place the day after he left it and it has remained so ever since. That is a measure of his singularity and his enduring status.

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**'IN HISTORY LIE ALL THE SECRETS':
WINSTON CHURCHILL, 1951-55.**

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Paul Addison, Churchill on the Home Front, 1900-1955, (Cape, 1992), p.439
- ² The phrase is Roy Jenkins'. See Roy Jenkins, 'Churchill: The Government of 1951-1955', in Robert Blake and Wm. Roger Louis (eds), Churchill: A Major New Assessment of his Life in Peace and War, (OUP, 1993), p.491
- ³ See Anthony Seldon, Churchill's Indian Summer: The Conservative Government, 1951-1955, (Hodder, 1981).
- ⁴ Addison, Churchill on the Home Front, p.412. 'In Churchill's view', Dr Addison wrote, 'they [the dominant elements in the TUC] formed a patriotic estate of the realm.'
- ⁵ Public Record Office, PREM 11/385, Churchill to Horsbrugh, 9 February 1953; Churchill to Tewson, 11 March 1953.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Quoted in Henry Pelling, Churchill's Peacetime Ministry, 1951-55, (Macmillan, 1996), p.39. Churchill delivered these words as part of a warning about the fragility of the British economy on 11 June 1952.
- ⁸ Martin Gilbert, Never Despair: Winston S. Churchill, 1945-1965, (Heinemann, 1988), p.835.
- ⁹ Addison, Churchill: On The Home Front, p.434.
- ¹⁰ Jenkins, 'Churchill: The Government of 1951-55' in Blake and Louis (eds) Churchill, pp.492-3.
- ¹¹ Ibid. p.493.
- ¹² Though the book attracted severe criticism from those who worked with him, the account written by Churchill's doctor, Lord Moran, remains indispensable reading. See Lord Moran, Winston Churchill: The Struggle for Survival 1940-65, (Hodder, 1966). For Moran's critics see Sir John Wheeler-Bennett (ed), Action This Day: Working With Churchill, (Macmillan, 1968). For the amphetamines see Andrew Pierce, 'Churchill "took amphetamines and barbiturates"', The Times, 9 June 1995
- ¹³ Jenkins, Churchill: The Government of 1951-55' in Blake and Louis (eds) Churchill, p.493
- ¹⁴ Michael Cockerell, Live From Number 10: The Inside Story of Prime Ministers and Television, (Faber, 1988), p.56
- ¹⁵ John Colville, The Fringes of Power: Downing Street Diaries, 1939-1955, (Hodder, 1985), p.632.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, p.633.
- ¹⁷ Gilbert, Never Despair, p.653.
- ¹⁸ Lord Ismay, The Memoirs of General the Lord Ismay, (Heinemann, 1960), pp.452-3.
- ¹⁹ Gilbert, Never Despair, p.656;
- ²⁰ PRO, CAB21/2804, 'Supervising Ministers', Brook to Churchill, date uncertain.
- ²¹ Donald Macintyre, 'Blair's big beauty contest', The Independent, 25 July 1996 and private information.
- ²² Colville, The Fringes of Power, pp.634-5.
- ²³ John Colville, The Churchills, (Weidenfeld, 1981), p.64
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Gilbert, Never Despair, p.708.
- ²⁶ Anthony Montague Browne, Long Sunset: Memoirs of Winston Churchill's Last Private Secretary, (Cassell, 1995), p.14
- ²⁷ Colville, The Fringes of Power, p.634.
- ²⁸ Harold Macmillan, Tides of Fortune, 1945-55, (Macmillan, 1969), p.491.
- ²⁹ Peter Hennessy, Muddling Through: Power, Politics and the Quality of Government in Postwar Britain, (Gollancz, 1996), p.188
- ³⁰ Montague Browne, Long Sunset, p.14
- ³¹ Ibid, pp.113-14.
- ³² Colville, The Fringes of Power, p.635
- ³³ Hennessy, Muddling Through, pp.105-6.
- ³⁴ Montague Browne, Long Sunset, p. 116

- ³⁵ Ibid
- ³⁶ Ibid
- ³⁷ Mr Priestley, a former Cabinet Office civil servant, has used this phrase in conversation on more than one occasion
- ³⁸ Peter Hennessy, Never Again: Britain 1945-51, (Cape, 1992), p.81.
- ³⁹ Gilbert, Never Despair, p.655. John Ramsden, The Age of Churchill and Eden 140-1957, (Longman, 1995), p.244; Addison, Churchill on the Home Front, p.408.
- ⁴⁰ John Ramsden, The Age of Churchill and Eden 140-1957, (Longman, 1995), p.244; Addison, Churchill on the Home Front, p.408.
- ⁴¹ Ramsden, The Age of Churchill and Eden 140-1957, p.227.
- ⁴² John Stevenson, Third Party Politics since 1945, (Blackwell, 1993), p.29.
- ⁴³ Winston Churchill, 'The Dream', in John Gross (ed), The Oxford Book of Essays, (OUP, 1991), pp.365-6.
- ⁴⁴ Gilbert, Never Despair, p.967.
- ⁴⁵ PRO, CAB 21/2654. 'Structure of Government. Notes of papers to be prepared on the hypothesis that Conservative Government is formed after the General Election' Undated.
- ⁴⁶ John W. Wheeler-Bennett, John Anderson, Viscount Waverley, (Macmillan, 1962), p352.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.
- ⁴⁹ Hennessy, Muddling Through, p.188.
- ⁵⁰ C.R. Attlee, As It Happened, (Odhams, 1954) p.14.
- ⁵¹ PRO, CAB 21/2654. 'Supervising Ministers.' Brook to Churchill.
- ⁵² House of Commons, Official Report, 3 November 1953, col.15.
- ⁵³ Ibid. col.20.
- ⁵⁴ R.S. Milne, 'The Experiment with "Co-ordinating Ministers" in the British Cabinet, 151-3', Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science, vol. xxi, No.3, August 1955, p.365.
- ⁵⁵ In an early chapter of his continuing PhD thesis 'Second Among Equals: Deputy Prime Ministers from Attlee to Heseltine - A Study in Power and Personalities'.
- ⁵⁶ PRO, CAB 21/2804, 'Co-ordinating Ministers', Brook to Churchill, 2 May 1952.
- ⁵⁷ Churchill's full text, delivered in the Commons on 6 May 1952, is preserved, in the big, widely spaced typescript he preferred, in PRO, CAB 21/2804.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid.
- ⁵⁹ Michael Kandiah, 'Lord Woolton's Chairmanship of the Conservative Party Organization, 1946-51', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Exeter, 1993, p.242.
- ⁶⁰ Chas Loft, 'The Failure of the Overlord System: Lord Leathers, Secretary of State for the Co-ordination of Transport, Fuel and Power.' Memorandum for Peter Hennessy, August 1996.
- ⁶¹ PRO, PREM 11/28. Brook to Churchill, 30 April 1952.
- ⁶² Anthony Seldon, Churchill Indian Summer, (Hodder, 1981), p105.
- ⁶³ Loft, 'The Failure of the Overlord System.'
- ⁶⁴ Moran, Winston Churchill: The Struggle For Survival 1940/1965, p.492, Moran diary entry for 2 September 1953
- ⁶⁵ Gilbert, Never Despair, p.905.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid.
- ⁶⁷ Hennessy, Muddling Through, p.189.
- ⁶⁸ Sir David Hunt, interviewed for the Wide Vision Productions/Channel 4 series What Has Become of Us?, August 1995
- ⁶⁹ Martin Gilbert, Winston S. Churchill: Road to Victory, 1941-1945, (Heinemann, 1986), p.715.
- ⁷⁰ Peter Hennessy, Cabinet, (Blackwell, 1986), pp.135-41.
- ⁷¹ Peter Hennessy, Muddling Through, p.113.
- ⁷² Hennessy, Muddling Through, p197.
- ⁷³ Gilbert, Never Despair, pp.1018-36.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid. p.1036.
- ⁷⁵ Hennessy, Muddling Through, p.194.
- ⁷⁶ Gilbert, Never Despair, p.1111.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid. p.1112.

⁷⁸ See Colville, The Fringes of Power, pp.667-80, for the surrogate government. For 'Rab's' fleeting opportunity to seize the prize see Ramsden's, The Age of Churchill and Eden, p.271 and Anthony, Howard, RAB: The Life of R.A. Butler, (Cape, 1987), pp.197-200.

⁷⁹ See Michael Cockerell, Peter Hennessy and David Walker, Sources Close to the Prime Minister, (Macmillan, 1984), p.120 and picture section.

⁸⁰ Colville, The Fringes of Power, pp.677-70.

⁸¹ Brian Cathcart, Test of Greatness: Britain's Struggle for the Atomic Bomb, (John Murray, 1994), p.273.

⁸² Addison, Churchill on the Home Front, p.9.

⁸³ Gilbert, Never Despair, pp.647, 659.

⁸⁴ See his disquisition to the Cabinet on both the European Coal and Steel Community and the idea of a European Army, PRO, CAB 129/48, C (51),32, 29 November 1951

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⁸⁶ Tom Harrisson, Living Through the Blitz, (Collins, 1976), p.313.

⁸⁷ Ben Pimlott, The Queen: A Biography of Elizabeth II, (HarperCollins, 1996), p.193.

⁸⁸ Colville, The Fringes of Power, p.708.

⁸⁹ Hennessy, Muddling Through, p.202.

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