



Leadership and Change: Prime Ministers in the Post-War World - Attlee

Dr Paul Addison

27 October 2005

As Professor Peter Hennessy indicated, one of the problems with being an historian is that, in the end, you become a historical document in your own right, and your younger colleagues begin to look at you more as source material than as an authority on history.

I grew up in the 1950s and 1960s when the national hero was, of course, Winston Churchill, but then I began to study history. I soon realised what made the difference between post war Britain, which was the country in which I was living, and the Britain of the inter-war years was the Attlee government of 1945 through to 1951.

They were, in many ways, the architects and the builders of the house we were all living in at that time. They had established the welfare state; they had nationalised 20% of British industry, they had begun to dis-establish the Empire, with a view to transforming it into a lasting Commonwealth. They had aligned Britain with the United States in the Cold War. All this was clear. What was the role Mr Attlee himself had played in all this?

He entered No 10 Downing Street in July 1945. He was there because of the rise of the Labour Party, because of all those episodes which began in 1900 when the Labour Representation Committee was founded, which led on to Labour becoming the major opposition party in 1922, to the triumph of Labour in the 1931 government.

Historians were already writing about all these things. But it's clear what the Labour Party had done for Attlee: the Labour Party had elevated him to the highest office in the land. What role did Attlee play and what had he done for the Labour Party? Well, I think you have to look back, first of all, at the reasons why Attlee became a Socialist in the first place.

In the late Victorian period and the Edwardian period, the Attlee family was prosperous. It was also very numerous family, by the way: Attlee was one of eight children. They were a prosperous, upper-middle class family, I think actually wealthier than Winston Churchill's parents, with a very comfortable home in Putney, to which they later added an estate in Essex.

Attlee's parents sent him to prep school, then on to Cambridge and University College Oxford, where he read history. His father was then a solicitor and it was decided that Clem would follow in his father's footsteps and train for the bar. But this is where Clem began to diverge from his own family history.

He passed his bar exams but he got bored with working in a solicitor's office. Why was this? Well, by all accounts the Attlees were a very happy and a very united family. They enjoyed life - they weren't a Puritan family, but they were Victorian Evangelicals. There were family prayers at 7am every morning in the Attlee household, with the servants present, and the Sabbath was very strictly observed. More than that, they all had a sense of moral purpose in their lives, which is why many of them were involved in philanthropic activities.

It was no wonder, then, that one of Attlee's brothers became a clergyman, his sister became a missionary, and his brother Tom, to whom he was always very close, became a Christian Socialist. Attlee, however, lost his religious beliefs at school. I always remember a passage in A. J. P. Taylor's memoirs when he says that one day when he was at school he looked out the window and said to himself "There is no God." I think some people say it happened to Attlee – he simply lost his religious faith. Towards the end of his life, his biographer sounded out his views on religion, and he said, "I believe in the ethics of Christianity; I can't believe the mumbo-jumbo." That was his view of Christianity.

Although he lost his belief in the supernatural, he still had that belief which his family had implanted in him, to have a purpose in life beyond simply making money or making a name for himself. The reason I think he was bored by the law was he could not find a purpose in law. In 1906 his brother took him to a Boys' Club in the East End, in Stepney – a club run for working class boys. Something about this club seemed to attract Attlee and he soon became a regular visitor helping out with the organisation of the club. In 1907 he became the resident manager of the club, and he remained resident there for several years.

Now when he first visited the club, his politics were those of a Tory. But this experience persuaded him that he must change his political views. I suppose, like so many people in the upper middle classes of that period, he was shocked when he discovered the real, material facts of poverty, and he began to wonder how such poverty could exist and what had caused it.

The experience, once he got to know people in the East End, also cleared him of the view that poverty was the fault of those who were poor. What he discovered among the Cockney boys with whom he was working at the club was that these people were the salt of the earth. He thought that they were morally very principled in their neighbourly behaviour towards one another, in their loyalty to their families, and he realised that the poor had all the moral character of his own family.

Instead of moving from Toryism to Liberalism and becoming a supporter of Liberal welfare, Attlee took a huge leap: he went all the way from Toryism to Socialism, without passing through a Liberal phase in between. He swung from right to left within a period of a few months. He joined the Independent Labour Party. It must have taken a great deal of courage because he was a person who was cripplingly shy, and he had taken on the role of propagandist for the Independent Labour Party. So he had to get out on the streets, stand on a chair, address passers-by on the wrongs of capitalism and the merits of socialism. He became an orator for the ILP. The ILP was a party of ethical socialism. They were not Marxists who believed in the class struggle; nor were they Fabians who believed that if you dined sufficiently with the Liberal or Tory politicians, you could permeate them with your own ideas, your own plans for society. They believed that you change society from below; they believed that it would be a moral transformation, a change of heart.

The ILP was a natural home for Attlee because the party expressed its strong ethical sense of mission. At the same time it had a practical purpose, and Attlee was always a very, very practical man. Although he was involved in the Independent Labour Party, most of his time up to the First World War was spent as a social worker. He took an enormous interest in individual cases. Of course his Socialist doctrine told him poverty could not be cured until the future Socialist society was inaugurated. That didn't prevent him from taking a direct interest in the personal affairs of people who were sick, people who were unemployed, or people who were enduring misfortune of any kind. He describes, for example, how he used to literally wash

the feet of some of the poorest in the Stepney area. He used to take great interest in the subject of school meals and tried to get better food in the local schools. He was very, very practical. So he was Socialist with an ethical vision, but he was very keen on any kind of practical enumeration that could be achieved in the short run. He was one of the very few Socialists of the heart who was genuinely interested in individuals, not just in the masses.

There was one other feature that I think is very interesting about this part of his life. The Boys' Club was actually a section of the Territorial Army— the boys wore uniform on the evenings when the club was in session - and Attlee, by virtue of his role in the club, was an officer in the Territorial Army. He held a commission, and he enjoyed drilling the boys. He also enjoyed going off to camp with them in the summer. This is a whole side of Attlee, I think, which came out dramatically after the outbreak of war in 1914.

His brother Tom, who also joined the ILP, opposed the war. He took an absolute abstinence position and was later on sent to prison as a conscientious objector. Clem had no doubts whatever what to do: he volunteered straight away and, indeed, he had to struggle to get in to the army. He had quite a distinguished war record. He served with the South Lancashire Regiment at Gallipoli, in Mesopotamia and finally on the Western Front. He also spent a lot of time training soldiers back home in Britain. He was twice very seriously wounded, and on each occasion he wanted to get back to the War. He was not by any stretch of the imagination a militarist, but he thought that the war was a moral issue and he rallied to his country. He was, as his behaviour shows, a very patriotic Socialist, not only a Socialist but a romantic patriot whose ideal England, as he explained, was actually the south of England: he was rather appalled by the north of England. I don't know whether he ever knew much about Scotland or Wales or Northern Ireland. He was a profoundly English patriot and, of course, this comes out in all sorts of other aspects of his life, particularly in his love of cricket.

I was looking the other day at the lectures he gave in the early 1960s on his view of the British Empire. Atlee was famed for his brevity, and they are extremely brief lectures, but he ends his final lecture by pointing out that one of the distinctive characteristics of the British Commonwealth is that its constituent nations play cricket against one and other! So, cricket was extremely important in Attlee's life, not just because he loved the game, but because it did express his sense of English identity, of what made England so well-defined a country.

Whether these two aspects, the Socialism and the patriotism, actually fitted together is something that we might argue about and debate. It never worried Attlee in the slightest bit. He never agonised about it. He was not a theorist or a philosopher. He trusted his own character, and he trusted that his socialism and his patriotism were perfectly compatible

The First World War does seem to have worked some changes in Attlee. Perhaps he was simply older by the end of the War, but I think one has to remember that he was promoted from lieutenant to captain, from captain to major. He clearly was a very effective officer, effective and efficient, and he seems to have acquired, during the First World War, a taste for command and perhaps a sense of his own backbone, which he didn't have before.

After 1918, he made the decision to become a full-time, professional politician, which he remained from that time onwards. It's necessary, I think, always to remind ourselves that Attlee was a full-time, professional politician because it's so easy to consider him a saint - to turn him into a kind of secular saint of the 20th century. Attlee was about as virtuous a person in his public and private life, I think, as you could possibly get. It was a stainless existence, you might say.

On the other hand, a politician is a politician, and Attlee was a politician, too. In other words, he had to compromise. He had sometimes to say things he didn't quite believe in. Even with Attlee and all his virtues,

there was the ambiguity which goes with the trait of being a major politician. Perhaps it's easier to be a minor politician, to be perfectly sincere and say all the time exactly what you think about anybody. I don't think a major politician would get very far.

He got in to Parliament as MP for Limehouse in 1922, and he then worked in the various primary roles as a loyal lieutenant of Ramsay MacDonald, the great Labour leader of the 1920s. MacDonald gave him office as Under-Secretary in 1924. He put him on the Simon Commission in 1927, which was actually set up in order to thwart the Labour Party. It was set up in order to produce constitutional proposals which would pre-empt the proposals which might be brought forth by subsequent Labour government.

Attlee loved politics. He was good on committees, he loved going through the debates, and he worked extremely hard. It's true that he cherished his weekends with his family, but they didn't catch even a glimpse of him during the week. Attlee had all the motivation of a professional politician. Throughout the 1920s, when he was a relatively minor figure of course, he was totally absorbed in the immediate tasks in hand. In the 1920s he was really someone no one considered as a possible high flyer or future leader of the Party. He was rather like a kind of Thomas the Tank Engine in the Parliamentary Labour Party in the 'twenties: very, very active and puffing up and down, and really useful, but no one thought he would ever pull the Express, never thought that he was powerful enough to do that.

It is often considered that Attlee rose to the top through chance, through accident. No one, I don't believe, would expect me to defend the British political system, but I don't think anyone in the British political system gets to the top by chance. If ever we have someone at the top who is there because they've appeared on television for 20 minutes and they've found celebrity and that gives them the right to enter Downing Street, we shall be in trouble! Attlee, of course, had a very, very long, hard-working apprenticeship to the Prime Ministership

It is true, though, that all politicians need a bit of luck and Attlee seemed to have more luck than most. Perhaps it was providence working on his behalf. His great break usually came at times of disaster, of great distress. The first came of course in 1931 when the Labour Government sank in the financial crisis of August 1931. The Labour front bench virtually disappeared; it was virtually engulfed by the crisis. MacDonald and his team joined the Conservatives in the national government, and were regarded thereafter as traitors to the Labour movement. Most of the other Labour front bench politicians were then swept away in the General Election of November 1931, after which only 46 Labour MPs were left in the House of Commons.

On the Labour front bench after the election, there were three politicians who had held office before: George Lansbury, who was elected Leader of the Party; Stafford Cripps, a wealthy and eccentric lawyer, and there was Clement Attlee. From 1931 to 1935, Attlee played quite a big role in the affairs of the Parliamentary Labour Party. He kept the flag flying. He made an enormous number of speeches - time and again, it fell to him to represent the Labour Party's point of view.

Still, no one thought of Attlee as the future leader of the Party. He had deputised for Lansbury when Lansbury fell ill. When Lansbury was in effect kicked out of the Party in October 1935, Attlee was elected Leader, but it was supposed to be as the temporary Leader. After the election, when Parliament reassembled, Herbert Morrison attempted to defeat Attlee for the leadership, but here again fortune played into Attlee's hand. Morrison was famous as a machine politician, and was I think an extremely able politician who did an awful lot for the Labour Party. He was one of those politicians who was abrasive, and offended a lot of other people, and because he offended so many people, Attlee got the leadership after the third Parliamentary election. Hugh Dalton wrote at the time in his diary, 'And the little mouse shall lead'. That was a very common estimate of Attlee all the way through from then until 1945.

How true was it? Well, from 1935 to the out break of war in 1939, Attlee was a very cautious leader of the opposition, but I think anyone who had been leader of the Labour Party at that period, really had to be cautious. There was a constant risk that the Labour Party would become divided, especially over the issues arising from the rise of Hitler. Attlee's job, as the job of any party leader would have been at that time, was to maintain the unity of the Party. I think one has to read his various pronouncements on foreign policy and re-armament at that period. Bearing in mind the fact that he was performing a balancing act and trying to reconcile the war with pacifist elements of the Party and the elements that were more keen on re-armament, there was a potential dangerous split there in the Party.

Attlee nudged the Party towards re-armament. In fact, he was pretty much in favour of Churchill's position on re-armament, but he couldn't come out and say so explicitly. And although he nudged the Party towards re-armament, even in 1939, he felt obliged to oppose the introduction of conscription, a decision which he subsequently regretted, because he said it sent out the wrong signal to the British public about Labour's standing towards Nazi Germany. Nonetheless in the terms of party management it was probably the right decision at the time.

The General Election was due in 1940. All indications are that, had it been held, the Labour Party would have lost again, and it would have been very difficult then, I think, for Attlee to go on to his position of Leader of the Party. Once again disaster intervened, which turned out to be good fortune for Attlee. War broke out in September 1939. The General Election was postponed, as we now know, until 1945.

It was Attlee who told Chamberlain in May 1940 that Labour would not support a national government and thereby precipitated the appointment of Churchill as Prime Minister and the creation of a coalition government. Attlee, as Leader of the Labour Party during the coalition, was inevitably going to hold high office in that coalition, and of course Churchill brought him straight into the war cabinet and he served in the war cabinet throughout the war. It was a remarkable turnaround for Labour. They now had a number of offices in government, without having won an election - a great opportunity. And Attlee, of course, was not only in the War Cabinet; he was on the Defence Committee, and he was on many other wartime committees as well. He was Law Privy Seal at one time, he was Law President, and Churchill made him Deputy Prime Minister in February 1942.

Some of Attlee's biographers are inclined to have the view that he made a big impact on wartime Whitehall. I fear this is not true. The big Labour beasts in the jungle (since we're all talking about big beasts in the jungle these days) in wartime, the big Labour beasts in the jungle were Eden, the Minister of Labour, Morrison, the Home Secretary and Dalton, who ended up as President of the Board of Trade. Attlee was not a powerful, heavyweight figure in Whitehall.

In 1941, the Cabinet Secretary had advised Churchill that the Food Policy Committee, of which Attlee was chairman, was not operating because Attlee lacked the ability to dominate with departments of state. He took over the Law President's Committee in 1943, which was the main committee, but the committee then declined in importance, and by 1945 Attlee was complaining that ministers, were no longer attending his committee.

But he was perhaps at his most effective in the Second World War in his dealings with Churchill. He was not afraid. He was a very loyal supporter of Churchill, but not afraid, in private, to stand up to Churchill. He took a lot of stick from the left Labour Party during the War because he kept Labour so firmly attached to the coalition, but he stood up to Churchill on a number of issues - on India, for example, and on social reconstruction - and he also, which was very important, made sure that that Labour was properly represented in the wartime coalition.

Churchill, I believe, grew to respect his judgement. There are all sorts of stories in which you read Churchill

disparaged Attlee - a modest little man with a lot to be modest about, and things like that. I came across a story the other day, from the late 1940s, when Attlee was the Prime Minister and Churchill was Leader of the Opposition, and a Tory MP who was visiting Chartwell referred, in Churchill's hearing, to "silly old Attlee." Churchill said, "What did you say? Silly old Attlee? Let me tell you, Mr Attlee is Prime Minister of Great Britain, he is a great patriot, and no-one who calls him silly old Attlee is going to be invited to Chartwell again!" Churchill liked him. Attlee was one of the people to whom Churchill was prepared to listen, all the more so because Churchill trusted him. Time and again, when you look at Attlee's career, you see how important it was that he inspired trust in other people. Churchill was absolutely certain that Attlee was not going to intrigue against him. Attlee was very straightforward in his statements; therefore, Churchill could be straightforward in his dealings with Attlee. He was a man with whom Churchill could do business.

Attlee also acquired another great asset during the Second World War, again because he was trustworthy. Ernest Bevin, the Minister of Labour who I think was the single most powerful Labour figure in the Second World War, had not known Attlee before, but now he came to deal with him. He took a great shine to Attlee. He found that he could trust Attlee. He felt that he could not trust Attlee's greatest rival in the party, Herbert Morrison. Hence from that time forward, all Herbert Morrison's attempts to displace Attlee as party leader were doomed because Ernest Bevin believed in him, and Ernest Bevin was not going to allow Herbert Morrison to intrigue his way into the leadership of the Party..

So in a sense, Attlee came out of the war much more secure in his leadership, because he had Bevin's support, than he had been at the outbreak of the war. He also acquired something else that I think was extremely important when he did run in 1945. He was perhaps the best-rehearsed Prime Minister ever to enter Downing Street. He had five years serving in all parts of the wartime machinery of government: he had been Deputy Prime Minister, he had run the government when Churchill was away, and Churchill of course was always footloose and spent a lot of time away in World War Two. He was brief about all the issues that awaited the Labour Government in 1945. He was already aware, for example, as all insiders were in 1945, that Soviet behaviour was erratic and potentially dangerous. He was also very well briefed on all the social questions that were arising from the Beveridge Report of 1942.

He had taken a great interest in the machinery of the wartime. Attlee, being a great practical man, was always interested in the machinery of government because he knew that whatever policies you had, the policies wouldn't work unless the machinery was there to make sure that they could be delivered.

When students write essays on why Labour won the '45 Election - and they do seem doomed in my experience to write essays on that question - they sometimes argue that Attlee, because of his role in wartime Britain, became a familiar or a popular figure and that this helped Labour's victory in 1945. I fear there's not much evidence of this. Attlee was extraordinarily low profile in World War II. When in 1942 an opinion poll invited people to nominate the potential successor to Churchill, only 2% backed Attlee. These must have been Labour loyalists, I suppose, amongst those polled! The electoral field flavour in the 'Twenties owed much to Macdonald and, in the Sixties, much to Harold Wilson, but you cannot really honestly say the same of Attlee in 1945. Neither was he a great strategist in the sense that he was an author of the Party's programme in 1945. That owed much more to Dalton and Morrison and others than it did to Attlee himself.

At the end of World War II, Attlee was still, generally speaking, underestimated in British politics. Hence, of course, the ill-advised attempts of the chairman of the Labour Party in 1945, before the election, to sway Attlee to resign the leadership. He wrote him a long letter citing historical precedents, to which Attlee famously replied, "Dear Leslie, thank you for your letter, the contents which have been noted"! This reminds us that Attlee had his share of self-interest and ambition. In 1935, after all, he stood for the leadership. He enjoyed being the leader of the Party. He was certainly not in the frame of mind to give it up on the grounds that he was not adequate to do the job.

I think perspectives on Attlee after this are very difficult to separate from perspectives on the Attlee governments as a whole. They are obviously connected. Here, I have to again become the historical document and remind myself that in the 1960s, when I first began to read about these things, it seemed that all the stimulating revision of British history was being done by historians of the new left. The great classic of that period - still a great classic, I think, in modern British history - was Edward Thompson's book *The Making of the English Working Class*. I also remember, though I haven't seen it in any second-hand bookshops for many years, the volume of essays edited by Robin Blackburn called *Towards Socialism*, which came out in the 'Sixties. The title sticks in my mind as a reminder of the fact that in the 'Sixties Socialism was thought of as an unrealised project which still lay in the future. There were still people who believed in Utopia in Britain in the 1960s, and when they looked back to the Labour government of 1945, what they saw was Socialist promises betrayed by the Attlee government.

I read all about this in a book by Ralph Miliband called *Parliamentary Socialism* where he argued that the great radical potential unleashed by World War II had been swamped by the Attlee governments. What was the truth behind this was that socialist historians, and I'm not saying they were Stalinists, they weren't, they were unable to forgive the Attlee governments for aligning themselves with the United States in the Cold War after 1945. Edward Thompson could never get over this. He argued that this had plunged Labour into a huge spiritual morass. Well, I don't think that I bought all this, but I could buy the idea that on the whole the Labour Government of '45 was very cautious and very conservative.

Look how perspectives have changed, and look at how the Labour Party has changed. Democratic Socialism is coming to the end of the road. Now that the Labour Party have shifted so radically into Thatcherite territory, what we're aware of, more and more, is how Socialist the Attlee governments of 1945 actually were. It is also obvious that they were one of the greatest architectural administrations of the 20th Century in the sense that, although they didn't achieve Socialism, they did leave behind a lasting legacy, and that legacy really survived until Mrs. Thatcher.

The British image that I grew up with was a kind of make-shift social democracy. There was a theory of consensus holding their place in government, but there was a kind of practical make-shift social democracy which the Tories and Labour parties both administered in the 1950s and 1960s, and that's what fell to pieces in the '70s.

If the Attlee governments were re-valued now - they have been re-valued, I think - the significance of these governments would be fully understood. Attlee himself has been re-valued as well. His reputation seems to soar. Only last year a survey was carried out in which 139 academic specialists were asked to rate the comparative success of 20th century British prime ministers. Attlee came out top, Churchill and Lloyd George were in second and third places, with Margaret Thatcher at number four. Whether or not Attlee rates the top spot or not is open to debate - it's a bit of a game this of course - but he certainly ranks very high. Why is that?

None of us will ever know what it will be like to enter Number 10 Downing Street as Prime Minister, and inherit that vast array of parts which go back to the medieval monarchs which are disposed of by a Prime Minister. It must be a most staggering experience. To keep your head, with all these powers at your disposal, must be particularly difficult.

What those powers reveal in Attlee, I think, was a capacity to use power, which he could not have demonstrated before. The role of leader of the opposition was never the one to give him power over the Labour Party. The wartime committees that he chaired in the coalition were constrained in all sorts of ways - he was constrained in running those committees. He didn't have the authority of the Premiership at that time. Once he did have the authority of Premiership behind him, he demonstrated a steely capacity for the use of power that hitherto had been unsustainable. You see, for example, a famous example, the way he took a very firm grip on the issue of India, and actually took over Indian policy and ran it himself. Now you

or I might be rather intimidated by the idea that you take over, particularly in the circumstances of 1945, the future of the whole sub-continent of India. Attlee had self-confidence on this issue before he knew about it, and he perceived two things: firstly, that British authority was coming to an end and had to be terminated with as little bloodshed as possible and, above all, if possible, avoiding any clash between British military forces and Indian nationals. He also saw that it would no longer be possible, as he had always hoped, to transfer power to a unitary Indian government. He put through his policy with great ruthlessness, sacked the visiting Viceroy, with instructions to get out more or less as soon as possible. It was all disguised subsequently as a transfer of power, and some people there argued that Labour intended this transfer of power all along. It was more disorderly than that. It was not what Attlee had wished for it, but it was ruthless and decisive.

Attlee was also pretty tough with people. In 1947, for example, he sacked several of his ministers. He was, as Harold Wilson once said, the best butcher among post-war British Prime Ministers. Apparently he would call a minister in and say, "You've had a very good innings. Time to hang your bat up!" and that would be that.

One of Attlee's best qualities I think was his honesty. He was not only aware of his own limitations, he was acutely aware of the limitations and flaws in others, and he could be very, very waspish about other politicians in the Labour Party.

Dalton of course committed an indiscretion by talking about the contents of his budget to a reporter on his way to deliver his budget in 1947. He could probably have got away with it but for the fact that Attlee insisted that he had to go. His verdict on Dalton: "Perfect ass! His trouble was he would talk, and he always liked to have a secret to confide. He did it once too often."

Attlee had been very competitive and he was always prepared to exercise authority over others because, with the exception of Ernest Bevin (whom I think he almost worshipped - he could find no fault in him) he was very aware of the faults of others. So once Attlee became Prime Minister, the realisation began to dawn that he was after all a much more formidable figure than people had realised.

Hugh Gaitskill, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, wrote as follows, in May 1950: "I don't dispute or refute that he was among the most successful British Prime Ministers, as indeed it would be said of Baldwin had he lived in a quieter period. It's one of the interesting features of our history that the qualities needed for success in peacetime are by no means the ones usually associated with greatness." This might be a double-edged verdict, but anyone looking at this Premiership would have to admit there were weaknesses in his Parliament.

He was out of his depth in economic policy. His absolute refusal to engage in public relations of any kind was really rather regretful, electorally speaking, for the Labour Party at that period. After the 1947 crisis, in which he really lost control of events, he was never, perhaps, able to exercise quite such a firm grip over the government again. But although he wasn't a great man of ideas or inventor of policy, he was as the Prime Minister, Chairman of the Cabinet, and the creator of a host of Cabinet committees, the driving force of what that government did. That's very important because that government had such a vast agenda, a veritable, practical one. So many bills came through Parliament, so many crises to deal with, so many issues at home and abroad to deal with - Attlee was the driving force, driving through this agenda. I think you see it in a lot of decisions of his early life and the patriotism of his early life. He ran the government in terms of social policy from a left of centre position. That's why he gave Aneurin Bevin responsibility for health and housing, and it was Bevin's role that was perhaps the most distinctively Socialist in that government. On the other hand, he put the great working class patriot, Ernest Bevin, in charge of foreign policy and, although he disagreed on some issues, he deferred to Bevin. But there was a Bevin/Attlee axis, and although Bevin and Attlee were both reluctant Cold Warists to begin with, once they were convinced that the United States was not prepared to permit itself to sharing nuclear secrets with Britain, they decided

that Britain must have its own nuclear deterrent and this came from a decision by Clement Attlee.

Attlee was also prepared to encourage the growth of secret intelligence activities directed against the Soviet Union. We still await more information, more evidence, about his role in that area.

What did Attlee bring then to the Labour government of 1945? How can you sum it up? Well, I think he brought simple convictions which were expressed in the work of his government. Along with his convictions, he brought driving force, very shrewd judgement of people and the ability not to worry too much about things. He used to say always that he never lost any sleep over the decisions: once he'd taken them, he couldn't affect them. He preserved his work-life balance. He still played cricket, he still went to Wimbledon to watch the tennis and he enjoyed seeing the Australians beating the Americans at tennis. Fundamentally I think what he brought to his government was moral authority with an equal accent on both terms, both moral and authority. He was a politician of absolute integrity in his convictions. At the same time, he was a politician who, when he had the opportunity, was prepared to exercise authority and to do so decisively. Fundamentally, all through his life, was the invincible late Victorian, convinced that the good in people outweighed the bad, convinced that progress could be made, that human conditions could be improved, but backing that up with the authority of an army officer. The morality of socialism plus the authority of an army officer. These are what helped make him so important.

© Dr Paul Addison, Gresham College, 27 October 2005