The Attlee Governments 1945–1951

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I should like to dedicate this book to my parents, for all their support and encouragement.

K. J.

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Seminar Studies in History

Founding Editor: Patrick Richardson

Introduction

The Seminar Studies series was conceived by Patrick Richardson, whose experience of teaching history persuaded him of the need for something more substantial than a textbook chapter but less formidable than the specialised full-length academic work. He was also convinced that such studies, although limited in length, should provide an up-to-date and authoritative introduction to the topic under discussion as well as a selection of relevant documents and a comprehensive bibliography.

Patrick Richardson died in 1979, but by that time the Seminar Studies series was firmly established, and it continues to fulfil the role he intended for it. This book, like others in the series, is therefore a living tribute to a gifted and original teacher.

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ROGER LOCKYER
General Editor

Foreword

The Attlee governments changed the face of Britain. After sweeping to power at the end of the Second World War, the Labour administration of 1945–50 presided over a series of far-reaching policy reforms, both at home and abroad. In domestic politics, attention focused on the introduction of a mixed economy and the welfare state. Within two years of its 1945 election success, Labour had secured major adjustments to the nation's pre-war, private-enterprise economy, avoiding any return to mass unemployment and forging ahead with an extensive programme of public ownership. At the same time, legislation had reached the statute book confirming the establishment of both a national health service and a new system of social security, designed to provide protection for all 'from the cradle to the grave'. By the time Attlee's second, short-lived government of 1950–51 left office, Labour could claim credit for the creation of a new order: a 'post-war settlement' that was to dominate domestic politics for a generation to come. In overseas policy, the legacy of these years was equally significant. British withdrawal from India was to mark the first stage in a transition from Empire to Commonwealth. And with the onset of the Cold War between the new superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, Labour's Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, was instrumental in reshaping international affairs. Above all, as the 'iron curtain' descended across Europe, he played a pivotal role in cementing Britain's wartime alliance with the Americans, most notably through the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. Abroad, as much as at home, these were changes that helped to set a pattern for subsequent decades.

Few would therefore deny that the Attlee governments were amongst the most formative in modern British history. But assessments of the outcome have been varied. Indeed in recent years, Labour's record in office has become the subject of increasing controversy, both among politicians and historians. During the 1980s, Conservative administrations under Mrs Thatcher consciously sought to break with much of the domestic post-war settlement. As

a result, the 1945 government has been depicted on the political right as a wrong turning – a time when the powers of the state were unnecessarily extended, thereby undermining individual initiative and creating levels of social provision that would be unsustainable in the long term (**9**). For writers such as Corelli Barnett, concerned to explain the nation's relative industrial decline since the war, the 1940s were a decade when welfare reform was given an unwarranted priority over economic regeneration; a choice that was to ensure that the 'dreams of 1945 . . . turned to a dank reality of a segregated, subliterate, unskilled, unhealthy and institutionalised proletariat hanging on to the nipple of state maternalism' (**40**). The most detailed research on the Attlee governments, however, has been carried out by historians of the left. For some, such as Kenneth Morgan and Henry Pelling, the post-war period witnessed the most successful example yet of democratic socialism in practice. According to Morgan, the achievements of these years brought the Labour movement 'to the zenith of its achievement as a political instrument for humanitarian reform', and made the 1945 administration 'amongst the most effective of any British government since the passage of the 1832 Reform Act' (**20**, **24**). Others have been less generous. Many left-wing critics see the period as one of wasted opportunity. Instead of thorough-going socialism, Labour offered only cautious change at home, involving little redistribution of wealth, and a foreign policy that tied Britain to the militantly capitalist United States (**10**, **18**, **27**, **30**).

How then should the performance of the Attlee governments be judged? The aim of this study is to provide a brief overview of the major elements of Labour policy, and to make accessible a selection of the ever-increasing volume of relevant source material. The book begins by looking at the evolution of the Labour Party on the 'road to 1945', as well as introducing the key individuals who were to dominate the post-war years. This is followed by a consideration of several sub-debates crucial to a wider assessment of Labour's record. How far, for example, was domestic reform during 1945–46 the product of a distinct ideology, as opposed to the simple working-through of agreed wartime reforms? To what extent was the government's sense of direction undermined by recurrent economic crises in 1947? In what ways might Bevin as Foreign Secretary be accused of betraying hopes of a 'socialist foreign policy'? How far did the age of austerity associated with Chancellor Stafford Cripps mark a retreat towards consensus politics? Why did Labour finally fall from power in 1951, and with what consequence? The general

argument of the study, implicit throughout, is spelt out more fully in the concluding chapter. While conceding the force of individual criticisms, Labour's overall performance, it will be claimed here, was one of unprecedented success. When set against the standard of previous twentieth-century governments, and in view of the legacy left by six years of total war, the 1945 administration could boast two overriding achievements: at home it created a more tolerable society, and abroad it made Britain more secure as an international power. In the words of the Prime Minister – not a man prone to exaggeration – this was to constitute a 'revolution without tears' (**85**, **106**).

Part One: The Background

1 Labour and the Road to 1945

The Labour Party came of age in 1945. As the Second World War drew to a close in Europe, the coalition government* of Conservative and Labour forces which had governed Britain since 1940 broke apart. Winston Churchill, the nation's inspirational wartime Prime Minister, now called upon the electorate to return him as the head of a new Conservative administration; he alone, Churchill claimed, was capable of dealing with the domestic and international legacy left by six years of war against Nazi Germany. Among politicians and commentators, it was widely anticipated that Churchill would sweep back to power in the general election of July 1945, just as Lloyd George had triumphed in 1918 as 'the man who won the war'. But this prediction proved to be wildly inaccurate. As the election results filtered through, it became apparent that the Labour Party had won a landslide victory. At the last pre-war election, held in 1935, Labour had trailed the Tory-dominated National government* by more than 200 parliamentary seats. In 1945, however, Labour secured nearly half the popular vote, winning 393 seats, compared with 210 for the Conservatives. On an average swing of 12 per cent, Labour made sweeping gains in towns and cities across the nation, capturing scores of constituencies that had never before returned a Labour member to the House of Commons. Hence it was not Churchill but the relatively unknown Labour leader, Clement Attlee, who went to Buckingham Palace to accept an invitation from the King to form Britain's post-war government (**16**). The war years had clearly wrought a remarkable political transformation. 'We', one Labour MP was reputed to have shouted at his opponents across the floor of the Commons chamber, 'are the masters now' (**32**).

But the road to 1945 – and the formation of the first-ever majority Labour government – had been long and arduous. Labour had only emerged as a distinct political force around the turn of the century, and for many years made little impression on the two dominant groups in Edwardian politics, the Conservatives and the Liberal Party. Before the First World War, the Labour Party, as it officially became known in 1906, was primarily a working-class pressure

group. In an effort to protect workers' interests by securing greater parliamentary representation, leading trade unionists decided to ally themselves with socialist societies such as the Independent Labour Party*. It was in the latter that many senior ministers in the 1945 government, including Attlee, began their political careers. Historians have long been divided over the extent to which the rise of Labour can be traced back before 1914, though it is generally agreed that the new Labour alliance – of socialists and trade unionists – faced many teething problems. In competing for votes under the restricted pre-war franchise, any limited parliamentary successes were the product of electoral agreements with the Liberals, and the small band of Labour MPs at Westminster were distinguishable from progressive Liberals more in terms of social background than political philosophy. On the other hand, the seeds of future Labour success could be seen in rapidly growing trade-union support, bringing greatly increased financial resources and a growing identification of Labour as the natural party of the working classes (**15**).

The Great War led to a critical breakthrough for Labour. Asquith's Liberal government came under increasing strain in meeting the demands of total war, and gradually after 1916 Liberal forces became polarised between followers of Asquith and his replacement as Prime Minister, Lloyd George. The carnage on the Western front* placed immense strain on all the political parties, but building from a lower base Labour was suddenly presented with new possibilities. In 1918 a new constitution and organisational structure was adopted; from now on, Labour was pledged in theory to 'Clause Four Socialism'*, although in practice most party supporters remained wedded to a 'labourist' ideology, emphasising collectivist social change rather than outright rejection of capitalism. Above all, the 1918 constitution was a symbolic reflection of Labour's newfound confidence. With the Liberals in disarray, the party was well placed to benefit from a massive extension of the franchise after the war, and finally severed any lingering electoral ties with local Liberal forces. The strength of the Labour Party, as it had been before the war, was still confined to the industrial heartlands of Britain – in northern England, Scotland and Wales – but by the early 1920s Liberalism had lost its claim to be the established party of the left in British politics. In 1924 the arrival of a new force in national politics was confirmed when Ramsay MacDonald went to Downing Street to form the first Labour government (**17**).

The experience of 1924 was not, however, a happy one. As head of a minority administration, dependent upon Liberal support in the