



## THE ROAD FROM 1945

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My old friend, Paul Addison was a comrade in more senses than one. We first met in Oxford in the mid-1960s when Paul was a research fellow at Nuffield College. We were reunited in 1970 when Paul was a lecturer at Edinburgh and I was working on my book on Keir Hardie at the National Library of Scotland. Paul was a man of immense charm, thoughtfulness and personal loyalty, quite apart from our sharing the same centre-left political views. I was very fond of him. He was a man of remarkable modesty. I have some letters of his from late 1975 when his great book *The Road to 1945* was on the point of appearing. Astonishingly, he writes to me that 'I have been in real dejection about it, convinced that it is all but a failure'.<sup>1</sup> Two weeks later he has seen two rightly glowing reviews, by A.J.P. Taylor in the *Observer* [19 October 1975], and by me in the *Times Literary Supplement* [17 October 1975], and his morale is fully restored. Of course, from the day of its publication to the present, it has been acknowledged throughout the academic world as one of the outstanding, most important works ever written on twentieth-century British history. He was to write several other fine books later, on the career of Winston Churchill and on British social change after 1945, but *The Road to 1945* is the masterpiece by which his standing as a fine scholar will always be measured. It is appropriate to recall its qualities here, and to reflect on how its central theme, the influence of wartime politics and social ideas in the years 1939-1945, was taken further and given permanent roots in our history in the years of peace that followed.

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Paul's brilliant analysis traces with unparalleled clarity and insight the political, social and ideological background to the Labour Party's landslide triumph in July 1945 (the result, delayed by the counting of servicemen and women's votes in distant locations). The entire political culture had been transformed, remarkably enough, from around the time of the fall of Tobruk in 1942. Key episodes showed how political attitudes were in flux – the neo-Keynesian 1941 budget from the unlikely hand of Kingsley Wood, of course the transformative Beveridge Report on social insurance in November 1942, the White Paper on health services in 1943, the Butler Education Act of 1944, and the Government's report on employment policy in 1944. Every one of them showed the passion of the intellectual elite for social reform and reconstruction. They were variously conveyed to a wider audience by the illustrated magazine *Picture Post's* special issue on post-war planning, by the ABCA classes on current affairs provided for the troops overseas, and, at the start of the war, by the folksy populist tone of J.B. Priestley's 'Postscript' broadcasts on the 'wireless'. Each one of these conveyed language and ideas that reflected the values of the Labour Party, and left the Conservatives intellectually stranded, even radical Tories like Harold Macmillan. Long before the end of the war, Gallup polls were predicting a huge Labour majority when peacetime politics returned, but few paid much heed at that time to these assessments of the public mood. This transformed political context

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Addison to the author, 29 September, 3 November 1975.

was what Paul's brilliant diagnosis so memorably spelt out. There were of course, many advantages that Labour enjoyed in domestic politics then, to offset the wartime charisma of the giant Churchill. Its constituency apparatus, often based on the trade unions, was in good fettle. Crucially, the leading figures of the Labour Party, Attlee, Bevin, Morrison, Dalton, Greenwood and Cripps were all familiar, respected, trusted figures in the Cabinet, moderate social patriots, and well-known to the wider public for their roles on the home front. When Churchill, in a disastrous election broadcast on 4 June 1945 suggested that these familiar personalities might introduce a form of post-war 'Gestapo' [TOYE, *The Roar of the Lion* : 212ff.], it was greeted with widespread incredulity. They were relatively elderly men – no left-wing cult of youth here and no women either – with clear recollection of the disappointment and sense of betrayal that followed the failures of the so-called 'hard-faced men' who dictated post-war policy after 1918. The evidence of the post-war electoral revolution that was coming was there well before the voters cast their ballots. In April 1945, in a by-election in Colchester in Essex, a town with deep-rooted Conservative traditions, Ernest Millington, an unknown RAF officer, a wartime pilot running for the tiny left-wing Common Wealth Party, overturned a 16,000 majority and triumphed by 6,433.<sup>2</sup> Two months later the deluge descended.

Churchill's wartime coalition resigned on 22 May when the Labour ministers, headed by Attlee, rebuffed the Prime Minister's entreaties, and left the Government. Labour and the unions were well-prepared for electoral battles to come. In effect they gave voice to many of the wartime calls for social and economic reconstruction, although Labour also added important thrusts from its own policies of the thirties. Churchill bleakly headed a 'caretaker' Conservative ministry for two months. Herbert Morrison latterly orchestrated the Labour campaign, starting with the election manifesto. It was unique in Labour's history for its clarity and its self-confidence. Ideas on indicative 'planning' were taken over from the extensive war programmes of individual departments, several of them headed by prominent Labour ministers including Herbert Morrison, the mediator and, to some extent, theorist behind the manifesto's policies. This document, brilliantly entitled *Let us Face the Future*, was compiled by a clutch of research groups. The actual writing up of it was undertaken – an inspired choice – by a young social theorist of broad progressive views, Michael Young, director of the progressive think-tank Political and Economic Planning. The tone of the manifesto owed much to his outlook, especially its commitment to general progressive values such as personal freedom and civil liberties, to which radicals of all kinds from the Liberals to the Communists could be expected to subscribe. But the language of the manifesto was robust. Early on, it proclaimed that 'the Labour Party is a Socialist Party and proud of it'. Its purpose was to create 'a socialist Commonwealth'. The tone was uncompromising and a bold challenge to pre-war social and economic shibboleths. The outcome was a tsunami of anti-Conservative political reaction, with Labour, which had never before won an electoral majority, winning 394 seats to the Conservatives' 210. Labour's leaders, who had generally expected that the war hero Churchill was certain to win by a comfortable margin, were astounded. Some middle-class ministers were full of aggressive self-confidence. Some working-class members of the new government were not so sure. The Welsh miner, Jim Griffiths, who captured Llanelli by over 30,000 votes, asked in amazed tones, 'After all this – *what*'? [GRIFFITHS, *Pages from Memory* : 77]. The answer to this provides the essential thrust of this chapter, what Ken Loach was later to call, in a famous film, 'the Legend of '45'.

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The first major topic of the manifesto was 'Jobs for All', a challenge to the tragic pre-war experience in industrial, working-class communities, the world of Wigan Pier, the Jarrow Hunger Marches, the Welsh and Durham mining valleys, crushed by 'the dole' and the means test. It had spawned a vivid literature of social protest, in which the names of Orwell, Walter Greenwood, A.J. Cronin, and Gwyn Thomas stood out... The 1945 manifesto gave general suggestions along the lines of centralised economic planning, but the main answer provided was the nationalisation of major industries,

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<sup>2</sup> He joined Labour after the election. Millington's obituary, *The Guardian*, 14 May 2009.

services and the Bank of England (though not the joint-stock private banking institutions). This had been a slow and confused process. Although the 1918 party constitution famously spelt out the social objective of public ownership of the means of production, distribution and control ('control', *i.e.* of the joint-stock banks, was later dropped), it was not until after the financial crisis of 1931 that it became dominant amongst Labour's objectives, in the writings of young economists like Jay, Gaitskell and Durbin, blending democratic socialism with Keynesian expansionist finance [E. Durbin, *New Jerusalems*]. Herbert Morrison's London Passenger Transport Board provided a municipal model in the form of the autonomous public board. These proposals appeared in full in *Labour's Immediate Programme* of 1937 and were broadly echoed in the manifesto of 1945. It was a hugely ambitious project, with varied answers as to what the purpose of nationalisation really was, whether improved labour relations and social justice considerations, or superior industrial efficiency and technical modernisation. Labour remained ambiguous on this crucial point. The 1945 party manifesto itemised fuel and power (notably the coal mines), inland transport (road and rail), and iron and steel. There would also be the public supervision of monopolies and controls. But nevertheless it cannot be seriously disputed that in the five years down to the General Election of February 1950 Labour pledges were met and its proposed reforms were indeed carried out. In the four and a half years of the Attlee Government, twenty per cent of the British economy, run since the dawn of the industrial era on the basis of private enterprise, free trade and the free movement of private capital, was taken into public ownership. Seven central industries and the Bank of England became the domain of the State.

Backed by a huge Commons majority, the Attlee Government embarked briskly on its policies for public ownership. In 1945-1946, there came the nationalisation of the Bank of England, civil aviation, cable and wireless and, most momentously, the coal industry. Long-distance road transport, the railways, and electricity followed in 1947, and gas in 1948, with finally iron and steel in 1949. To these should be added the Cotton (Centralised Buying Act) of 1947 and national development measures like the 1948 Town and Country Planning Act. It was a highly radical programme, but it should be noted that there was a high degree of consensus over many of these measures and relatively little challenge from the Conservatives; after all, industries such as coal and steel, for instance, were under a high degree of public control during the war. The Bank of England's nationalisation was essentially technical and showed little difference from its previous functions; there was scant power awarded over the clearing banks, capital movements or national investment.

Hugh Dalton, Labour's Chancellor, introduced the Cable and Wireless measure with the words 'The Socialist advance continues' [HC Deb 21 May 1946, vol 423 c201], but neither it nor Civil Aviation caused much controversy. Coal nationalisation, accompanied as it happened by bitterly cold wintry weather which led to severe shortage of supplies, was more robustly Labour in its form. From Durham to South Wales, on Vesting Day, 1 January 1947, banners flew at pitheads, bearing the slogan, 'Today the mines belong to the people'. The National Coal Board inspired little affection thereafter, but very little was heard from mining areas of carrying out schemes of workers' control or quasi-syndicalism voiced in the Welsh valleys before 1919. Public ownership again went through swiftly, apart from some grumbling at the generous rates of compensation paid to private share owners. Electricity and Gas were carried through fairly swiftly and so, with more argument, was Road Haulage, where the position of the 'C Licence' small operators aroused much sympathy. But the passage of nationalisation went through without much argument in the three years. As in France, Austria and other European countries, the post-war period saw a large expansion of State enterprise and ownership.

It was from 1949 that the road from 1945 become more rocky. This arose in the highly controversial case of iron and steel. This was less consensual than coal nationalisation. The steel industry had apparently performed well under the pressure of wartime, and the Churchill government had sponsored such powerful new ventures as the Steel Company of Wales with a tinsplate strip mill, at

Port Talbot in South Wales. As for the workforce, the steel workers were far less enthusiastic for State control than were the coal miners. Indeed Lincoln Evans, general secretary of the steelworkers' trade union actually opposed public ownership. Furthermore, iron and steel appeared to deviate from the original nationalisation idea focussing on services and extractive industry, and veered, alarmingly to some, into manufacturing industry, car and aircraft manufacture, and civil engineering. The Conservatives felt emboldened in attacking it. The Cabinet was seriously divided on the question, Dalton, Cripps and Bevan being in a minority who favoured nationalisation, Morrison, Addison and Jowitt in a larger group who favoured a compromise; Bevin sat on the fence, with Attlee himself anxious to defer a decision until after the general election [MORGAN, *Labour in Power 1945-1951* : 212-213]. In the end, the Government concluded that 'steel is power' and thus went ahead with an Iron and Steel Bill, which was rejected by the Lords and finally made it through Parliament and on to the statute book in 1951, by which time, the Government's landslide majority of 1945 had disappeared. It weakened the Government fundamentally at a period of economic weakness after the devaluation of the pound and the controversial onset of the Korean War.

The problems surrounding the iron and steel showed that the momentum was being lost in the drive for nationalisation, and more generally it had left the Government as a whole, many of them elderly men weary of the pressure of government for almost ten continuous years in war and peace. Cripps and Bevin left office through ill-health, and shortly afterwards Michael Young, the author of *Let us Face the Future*, broke with the Attlee government in 1950, claiming it had run out of ideas. Public ownership had been supplanted by centralised economic planning. No model other than the Morrisonian public board was followed: the Co-operative Society for one protested at the failure to follow its own mutualist method. However, the legacy of nationalisation continued, and the great bulk of it was retained during the thirteen years of Conservative rule that followed the Attlee government. In 1960 Gaitskell's demand that Clause Four, the commitment to nationalisation, be abandoned was heavily defeated, and it remained as a symbolic statement of intent until Tony Blair had it jettisoned in 1994. Clearly the Government had carried out its mandate, even though the legislative outcome became less popular. The fact that many of the measures had been carried out in relatively ancient industries with ageing stock and infrastructure did not give State ownership wide support, while the central board model of management made the new public industries seem remote and undemocratic. They reflected Douglas Jay's somewhat bleak phrase, 'the gentleman from Whitehall knows best' [*The Socialist Case* : 258]. On the other hand, many of the publicly-owned utilities coped well with post-war economic pressures – gas, electricity, cable and wireless and civil aviation were notable successes. Labour programmes and manifestos placed a diminishing emphasis on the issue thereafter. In the 1950 General Election, the party proposed a small 'shopping list' of lesser nationalisation measures – cement, wholesale meat, water supply and, mysteriously, sugar refining. The sugar monopolists Tate and Lyle countered the last with the widely advertised cartoon figure, 'Mr Cube', which meant that a prominent advertisement for private enterprise appeared on every family's breakfast table. It was echoed by a Tory women's pressure group, the Housewives' League. As a result, Labour's majority of over 150 plunged to only six. Not until 1983 and then 2019 did nationalisation again play a part in Labour's election programmes, and both elections were heavily lost by huge majorities. Nationalisation was no longer a vote-winner.

On the other hand, 'jobs for all', which nationalisation was proposed to create, was a clear, even triumphant, success. After the desperate economic ordeal of the pre-war years, the road from 1945 saw **full employment** return with a vengeance. Labour had highlighted this priority in its 1945 campaign, a symbol of social justice and also a gendered commitment to masculinity. 'No more dole queues, in order to let the Czars of Big Business remain kings in their own castles'. Stripped of the emotional rhetoric, Labour carried out its promises. There was a slump in employment after the fuel shortage in the severe winter of early 1947, but this passed away. The mass unemployment of the inter-war years never returned. Despite all the difficulties of trade, the balance of payments and the



dollar shortage, the level of employment rose steadily with joblessness a mere 1.5 per cent of the insured labour force when the Attlee government resigned after narrow electoral defeat in October 1951. Of the 'depressed areas' of high unemployment in the thirties, north-east England, with 38 per cent unemployment in 1938, now showed only 3 per cent out of work, with Scotland at 4 ½ per cent and South Wales at 5 ½ per cent. Partly this was a happy consequence of peace returning. Exports boomed after the war, especially when Cripps was Chancellor in 1947-1950, especially in the United States where manufactured products like the Land Rover flourished, while potential rivals like Germany and Japan were still recovering from military defeat or occupation. But the Government deserved much of the credit too, with the Board of Trade using the Coalition Government's 1945 Distribution of Industry Act to introduce new modernised industry to the old 'depressed areas'. Much use was made of Industrial Development Certificates and financial incentives through Development Agencies and local trading estates, following on from policies promoted during the wartime years. In late years, Labour's proudest boast was that it was the party of full employment which had exorcised for ever the ghosts of Jarrow, Wigan and Merthyr Tydfil. Until the 1980s, when unemployment began to be replaced by inflation and the money supply as the major source of working class anxiety, this gave Labour much of the intellectual, if not the political, ascendancy. In time, social observers began paying more serious attention to women's employment as well, a cause which received limited attention in the post-war years.

Next to industrial growth, Labour had featured the planned development of **agriculture** in its 1945 manifesto. This was another success, with much cross-party backing. Although Labour was not powerful in most rural areas such as East Anglia, its policies gave post-war farmers something of a golden age. It was, of course, particularly valuable in dealing with post-war food shortages and difficulties with imports from dollar areas. In part it was following the marketing board policies of pre-war, pioneered by Dr. Christopher Addison in the second Labour government of Ramsay MacDonald in 1930-1931 – in fact Addison was now in government again as leader of the Lords under his old comrade, Attlee.<sup>3</sup> 'Chris' and 'Clem' were a strong partnership. The manifesto also cited the successful food production strategies of the war years. But Labour's Agriculture Act of 1947, put through by the ex-miner, Tom Williams, added much impetus of its own with guaranteed prices and an annual price review. But what Labour did not attempt to pursue to do was another item in its manifesto – 'Labour believes in Land nationalising and will work towards it'. In fact, as Lloyd George found in promoting his land taxes before 1914, this proved very complicated, especially the valuation of land, and was also perhaps an obstacle to a housing programme. Instead Labour followed the wartime Uthwatt report in championing as policy of town and country planning (including several new towns) and this proved to be a far more effective alternative. Down to the present day, land nationalisation has not found many takers amongst the British Left. It was too hard to handle.

Another, immensely important area where Labour carried out much of its policy promises was that of **social policy**, in particular health, housing, education and social insurance. **Health** policy featured the most iconic achievement of the Government's entire programme, Aneurin Bevan's National Health Service. Curiously enough, the idea had only a brief and perfunctory mention in the 1945 manifesto, just three sentences headed 'Health of the Nation and its Children'. The only specific commitment was to multi-task health centres, which in fact, never came about. Labour's ideas had, however, developed in the thirties. The excitement kindled by the Beveridge report in 1942 gave it hugely more prominence. It listed a free universal health care system as 'Assumption B' amongst its preconditions ('Assumption A' was Children's Allowances and 'Assumption C' full employment) [*Social Insurance and Allied Services*: 158-163]. Henceforth Labour in effect took over the message of Beveridge and made it its own. The idea of a universal national health service was pressed with especial determination by the Socialist Medical Association, a rare left-wing pressure-group within the medical

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<sup>3</sup> For Christopher Addison, see K. and J. Morgan, *Portrait of a Progressive*.

professional, chaired by Dr. Somerville Hastings MP, which included such influential doctors as Christopher (now Lord) Addison. The wartime coalition Government also provided a lead with the 1944 *Health White Paper*, and both Ernest Brown and Henry Willink tried their hands at Health Service Bills, which however made no headway largely because of the self-centred resistance of the medical profession. Labour therefore took over health policy in July 1945 with a largely clean slate.

The eventual triumph of a National Health Service owed almost everything to the dynamism of Aneurin Bevan, the ex-miner and voice of the socialist left, in his first ministerial appointment, whose blend of dynamism and charm forced the bill through. As is well known the next two years and more were occupied by a long conflict between Bevan and the British Medical Association, who resisted key aspects of the government's proposals such as the ending of private medicine, the redistribution of general practitioners to 'under-doctored areas', the sale and purchase of practices by doctors, and their being made a salaried profession in the service of the State. It was noticeable that the most bitter resistance to the bill came from the BMA executive, who tended to represent wealthier suburban doctors. Bevan, however, backed by a highly supportive civil servant, Arthur Rucker, stuck to his guns and won a considerable victory in the Cabinet by pushing through the nationalisation of hospitals, defeating Morrison, former leader of the London County Council, who preferred a system of local control of municipal and voluntary hospitals. Bevan gained the important backing of the elderly Addison, and, crucially, of Attlee himself [*Cabinet Conclusions*, 1945]. The Conservatives, contrary to their later claims, strongly resisted the health service proposals and backed the doctors in their intransigence, Churchill weighing in with bitter personal onslaughts on the Welshman Bevan, 'this Tito from Tonypandy', and 172 Tory MPs voted against the second reading. Eventually in May 1948 Bevan and the BMA reached an agreement, much helped by conciliatory medical leaders like Lord Moran. It did not meet with the approval of many on the left. Bevan had to make large concessions to the medical profession, allowing for private practice and private 'pay beds' in hospitals to continue, and assuring them that they would never be turned into a salaried profession of civil servants. To the great disappointment of the Socialist Medical Association, expensive health centres were not developed, partly on the grounds that they would take away too much from building resources required for housing. Bevan, of all people, was attacked for lack of socialist zeal and ignoring the 1945 manifesto. Even so it was a huge achievement, creating a nationally-financed universal system, free at the point of need. Its official historian, Charles Webster, calls it 'the most ambitious publicly-provided health service to be established by a major western democracy' [*The Health Services since the War I*: 397]. It was also a progressive, redistributive system which reduced inequality. Nye Bevan's work stood the test of time and, even in the economic difficulties of the early twenty-first century, it survived to become everyman's idea of the Welfare State, and what it meant to be British. In that respect it had overtaken the monarchy itself. In the harsh spring of 2020, with the nation stricken by Covid-19 virus, the leaders of the Conservative Party, with unconscious irony, queued up to pay tribute to the NHS as a unique national treasure. Boris Johnson, emerging from intensive care in hospital, declared that it had saved his life.

**Housing**, another of Bevan's responsibilities at the Ministry of Health, was less contentious, though a mighty problem confronted the minister after the ravages of the wartime blitz. *Let us Face the Future* declared that 'housing will be one of the greatest and one of the earliest tests of a Government's determination to put the nation first'. It pledged that the Government would strive to give every family decent accommodation along with building schools, hospitals and factories, and attractive town planning. In fact, the programme got off to a slow start: Bevan himself unwisely claimed he spent a mere five minutes a week on housing policy. The main emphasis was placed on houses built by local authorities rather than for private purchase, effectively by the middle class, and local councils varied a good deal in their efficiency as Addison had found at the Ministry of Health in 1919-1920. There were shortages of building materials and of skilled labour in the post-war years and not until 1948 was there clear progress, with 230,000 dwellings completed that year, while in many areas

housing targets were scaled down from the original 200,000 completions a year. Bevan was accused of being 'too doctrinal' over private housing, and laying too much emphasis on the quality and comfort of council housing. Even so, the housing programme did show results in the end: a total of 194,000 new houses were completed in England and Wales by October 1951 with further temporary homes such as the famous 'pre-fabs' and repair of war destructions amounting to a further half a million damaged properties. It was not the strongest part of the government's achievements, but in view of the immensity of the legacy of wartime bombing and frequent balance of payments and currency crises, it was a respectable record, if no more.

**Education** was an area where Labour's priorities followed the wartime Coalition's policies, in this case the 1944 Butler Education Act. This created a bold new structure of State education. Secondary establishments were divided into the famous tripartite system of grammar, technical and modern schools. In time this scheme was to be bitterly condemned, as by Anthony Crosland in *The Future of Socialism*, a famous work in the mid-1950s, as creating rooted social inequality with the notorious 'eleven plus' examinations dividing schoolchildren into the sheep (largely working-class) going to the less prestigious modern schools and the mainly middle-class goats heading to the grammar schools. Labour's instincts in government were notably less radical than in the high noon of 1945. The Minister for Education, the sole woman in the Cabinet, the left-wing La Pasionaria, Ellen Wilkinson, was strongly wedded to the grammar schools of which she was herself a product. She had won a scholarship to Ardwick Higher Elementary Grade School in Manchester, and eventually gained a good history honours degree at Manchester University, and saw grammar schools as the route for bright working-class children which might challenge the 'public' (*i.e.* private) schools in academic effectiveness. She denied that the Butler Act led to a divisive system and moved towards a far more centrist viewpoint, encouraged by Cripps of Winchester and Dalton of Eton in Cabinet – and perhaps by her private lover, Herbert Morrison. There were protests by Labour MPs who had been school teachers, and by an important pressure-group, The National Association of Labour Teachers, headed by W.G. Cove, a former teacher from South Wales. There was only limited enthusiasm and pressure in the Labour Movement for comprehensive schools at this time, although the first such school was created in Anglesey in North Wales in 1951. This relative conservatism in the State system of secondary schooling was matched by a total failure to reform the 'public schools' in any way. Labour repeated the shibboleth of the Fleming report of 1944 for transferring pupils from State-funded elementary schools to the 'public schools' (which never took place). Symbolic of the government's approach was Attlee's own devotion to Haileybury boarding school – he would draw up in No. 10 a list comparing the number of Old Etonians with Old Haileyburians in his government. Equally Oxford and Cambridge, with their largely public-school undergraduates, did not suffer any disturbance. Nor did Wilkinson's successor at Education, Tomlinson, a working-class trade unionist, show any more reformist zeal. He was so impressed by a visit to Eton that he declared that had he gone there (instead of to Rishton Wesleyan school which he left at the age of twelve) he could have won the battle of Waterloo by himself [BLACKBURN, *George Tomlinson* : 6]. Labour achieved much in education in other ways, in school building, in teachers' pay (though no equal pay for women) and higher budgets which helped to make the education boom of the 1950s possible. But it was not in general an area where the socialist vision of 1945 shone brightly.

The supreme area where Labour's approach was governed by wartime debates was in implementing the Beveridge report on **Social Insurance**. This task fell to another Welsh miner, James Griffiths. His main objective was to implement Beveridge, and this he did in his 1946 National Insurance Act which laid down new scales of health and unemployment benefits, maternity and widows' benefits and retirement benefits, on higher levels than those recommended in Beveridge. It went through with little difficulty. Two other important measures in 1948, the Industrial Injuries Act and the National Assistance Act (introduced by Bevan) added to a complete remapping of social provision. The universalism of the National Insurance Act created the basis of the Welfare State, even if the growth of

private insurance schemes was attacked by the left and proposed for nationalisation in the 1950 general election 'shopping list'. It transformed the lives of working-class citizens, the world of 'less eligibility' and the old Poor Law. Unlike Lloyd George's Tory-led coalition in 1918-1922, the legacy of Attlee's Labour government was indeed, in great measure, a land fit for heroes – and heroines too.

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A striking difference between Labour's manifesto and all previous programmes the party put forward was in **international affairs**. This time Labour offered a programme for a party intending to govern. The party was more precise in its world role than ever before, anxious to show that the semi-pacifist posture of the party in the appeasement years, during the time of George Lansbury especially, would no longer apply. There were bold statements about Labour's approach to defence and world leadership and in international collaboration. The whole sense was that Labour Britain was a great power. It had, after all, won the war. Winston Churchill had been the most iconic wartime leader. It was one of the big three at Yalta and Potsdam, and one of four occupying powers in Germany, with Britain in charge of the vital industrial region of North-Rhine Westphalia. In addition, it was leader of the Commonwealth, head of the sterling area negotiated at Bretton Woods in 1944, a close ally of the United States (which should never again be allowed to slide into damaging isolationism), an ally of France, China and other victors of the war, committed to the independence of India and the economic development of colonies in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean, a force for peace and a guarantor of global stability. It was British arms which received the surrender of the Germans on Lüneburg Heath, the Italians in Ethiopia in 1941 and the Japanese in French Indo-China and the Dutch East Indies in 1945. These bold objectives were the dominant priorities of the new Foreign Secretary, a massive trade union leader and social patriot supreme, Ernest Bevin. His outlook was shown by his view in 1946 that Britain should pursue a nuclear weapons programme – if there was an atomic bomb, 'it should have the bloody Union Jack upon it' [Peter Hennessy, *The Times*, 29 September 1982; Cabinet Committee on Atomic Energy, 25 October 1946].

This is not the place to spell out the intricate course of international relations in the post-war years of so-called Cold War from the end of the Second World War to the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. Britain played a central role in all the international conflicts and crises of these years. The Government in general showed a united front at this period. Even a socialist like Aneurin Bevan soon realised that left-wing dreams of 'left speaking to left' after the war were a total illusion. When the Russians blockaded Berlin in 1948-1949, Bevan led the cry for relieving columns of Western allied tanks to be sent through the Soviet zone of Eastern Germany to provide food and other aid for Berlin's citizens. There was, however, serious dissent from the left in the Commons and the Labour movement, feeling that Cold War confrontation was far from the spirit of 1945, there were many calls for 'a socialist foreign policy'. In general, the Attlee Government's foreign policy generated far more dispute than its domestic programme. Some of the critics were far-left neo-Communist Marxists, Platts-Mills, Solley, Hutchinson and Zilliacus, all four of whom were expelled from the Labour Party in 1948-1949. More effective were the 'Keep Left' MPs headed by Richard Crossman, Michael Foot, Tom Driberg and Ian Mikardo, who gave Bevin much trouble in the Commons, calling for a more independent foreign policy, freer from American pressure. They exerted perhaps their maximum strength in May 1947 in their pamphlet *Keep Left* which Bevin angrily referred to as 'a stab in the back'. Their views were reinforced by what was perceived to be Bevin's anti-Israel approach in handling the unending dilemma of disentangling the British mandated territory of Palestine. Anti-semitism was anathema to Labour at that time. But these were minority voices. Bevin stood up to Soviet demands with broad support from his party, at a time when the United States showed signs of reverting to their pre-war isolationism in Europe. A socialist foreign policy with someone as intransigent and aggressive as Stalin made the prospect of a democratic Labour administration forming any kind of common front with him quite unthinkable.



There were several decisive stages in Britain's Cold War stance. One was British involvement in the civil war in Greece and its decision to withdraw its forces in the face of internal financial difficulties; after difficult negotiations, British forces and other aid to Greece were replaced by those from the United States. In 1948 there was acute crisis over Germany with much Soviet pressure and eventually a blockade of West Berlin: the deadlock was made worse by the perceived nationalism of the German Social Democrats' leader, Kurt Schumacher, which Labour felt might rekindle echoes of Nazism. In 1949 the Anglo-American alliance grew all the stronger with the foundation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), under which Britain committed itself to taking a major role in European defence and the US committed itself indefinitely to defending the frontiers and social fabric of Western Europe, thereby breaking with over a hundred years of American foreign policy, since the days of the Monroe Doctrine in the 1820s. Another phase of acute crisis came in the Far East in June 1950 when North Korea, with Communist Chinese backing, attacked South Korea without warning. At a time of difficult financial issues, Britain rapidly lined up with the US in sending troops to South Korea in the name of the United Nations to confirm its role as 'first in the queue' in Washington.<sup>4</sup>

This, however, ended the harmony of the Attlee Government over international policy. There was furious controversy in the Cabinet between Aneurin Bevan and Hugh Gaitskell, Cripps' strongly pro-American successor as Chancellor. Gaitskell's 1951 budget involved a large new defence programme of £4,700m, and, crucially new charges for teeth and spectacles in the previously free National Health Service. Aneurin Bevan angrily resigned following this attack on 'his' health service, and Harold Wilson, President of the Board of Trade and a centrist figure, joined him. Bevan's followers, the so-called 'Bevanities' pursued a furious campaign against Gaitskell, along with Attlee and Morrison thereafter (Bevan had now resigned and then died). Civil war broke out in the Labour Party for the next five years or so. Not surprisingly, Attlee's government was defeated in the October 1951 General Election, and fell from power. Labour's momentous period in power was over.

The course of Labour's foreign policy after 1945 clearly did not arouse either the unanimity or the enthusiasm shown in domestic matters. The crisis which led to Bevan's resignation in April 1951, at the height of the Korean War, could have been avoided (the gap between the rival groups was not large and Attlee's illness made him much less effective in keeping Bevan in line) [MORGAN, *Labour in Power 1945-1951* : 441ff.] But at least it can be said the 1945 promises of Britain taking a major role in world affairs was amply kept. Despite constant financial pressures, and the aftermath of six years of total war, for two years battling alone against the fascist powers, Britain maintained a leading role in confronting Stalin, in keeping land forces across the world from Belize to Hong Kong, and embarking, in strict secrecy, on its own nuclear weapons programme. Only later, from the fifties onwards, did it become clear that the burden, in financial and human terms was impossible and the stance of world leadership, in the face of superpowers like the US and the Soviet Union, an illusion.

There was one huge gap in British policy – the failure to take any leading role in western Europe. There were defence pacts with Western powers, but any effort to lead Europe in political and economic terms was limited. In May 1950, the French Prime Minister, Robert Schuman, along with Jean Monnet, tried to get Britain to agree to joint collaboration in a coal, iron and steel community with the French and the Germans, which was rejected on grounds of sovereignty and insularity much as occurred in the Brexit controversy in 2016-2019. Attlee, Bevan, Cripps and Dalton were all hostile, while Morrison cited the opposition of the Durham miners to the idea. It was the American alliance, the alleged 'special relationship' that was Labour's overseas priority, buttressed by the Commonwealth. In Europe it would proceed expensively and alone, with little sympathy for any kind of political union with its neighbours.

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<sup>4</sup> Sir Oliver Franks to Attlee, 15 July 1950 (NA, PREM 8/1405, Pt. I). Franks was the Ambassador to Washington, 1948-1952.

Looked at generally, the most striking feature of Labour's programme as it was unveiled in 1945 was that it was carried through. Michael Young's manifesto in 1945 had aimed at appealing to progressives and liberals everywhere. In general it succeeded in doing so, even if it offered no great gestures on civil liberties. It did, however, reflect a close symbiosis with the trade unions. The Labour alliance created by Keir Hardie and others after 1900 was never closer. Almost the first measure introduced by the government was the repeal of the hated Trades Disputes Act passed by Baldwin's Conservative Government in 1927 to curb the unions' political levy. This repeal measure was introduced by none other than the Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, the most powerful trade union leader alive.<sup>5</sup> In return, despite a rash of unofficial strikes in 1949-1950, the union membership responded with solidarity and loyalty to their class. It should be noted that in the post-1945 period around three quarters of the population regarded themselves as working class. Even at the height of austerity and food rationing, policies like 'fair shares' and food subsidies in the Cripps period at the Treasury in 1947-1950 kept the workers in line. It helped that the main trade union leadership in these years was right-of-centre and loyalist, men like Will Lawther of the Miners and Arthur Deakin of the Transport Workers. Labour lost no by-elections in Labour-held seats between 1945 and 1951 and individual party membership went up steadily to the mid-1950s. Even in the 1951 election, which it lost, Labour polled more votes than the Conservatives (14m. votes) and many observers felt that they would soon return to power, certainly not remain out of office for the next thirteen years.

At the same time, several of Labour's pledges were not carried out and there were many gaps in the record. As has been observed, nothing was done on 'public schools', the Universities or the private joint-stock banks. The health centres promised in 1945 never materialised. The whole area of constitutional reform was in general ignored. Herbert Morrison, who had the admittedly difficult task of keeping a large flock of new MPs disciplined and in line, was conservative on the constitution, House of Lords and all. The relationship between Cabinet and Parliament or parliamentary procedure remained essentially unchanged, as did the rule of law, despite the extreme social and judicial conservatism of high court judges like Lord Goddard, a strong supporter among other things of capital and corporal punishment. Throughout, the government's strategic approach remained in its programme – the nationalised industries, the National Health Service, economic planning – strongly centralised. Whitehall prevailed at most levels of government. There was no hint of devolution and appeals on this from the Welshman James Griffiths within the government were unsuccessful [Griffiths, 'A Note on the Electricity Bill', 1946]. There was virtually no recognition of Scottish or Welsh nationality – not surprisingly, since the national parties in those two nations were feeble after the unifying effects of the world war. There was little attempt either to reform the sectarian problems of Northern Ireland, although the Free State to the south achieved Republican status in 1948. In social policy, it is remarkable that a government returned with a strong women's vote did little for sexual equality while equal pay was not attempted – much as the Beveridge report had assumed. Labour's priorities were founded on a man's world, the union, the pub and the football terraces, and it showed. Not until the 1970s did feminism make significant inroads.

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There were important gaps, therefore. Yet it is remarkable that almost all the important elements of *Let us Face the Future* were put into practice in these six years. Nationalisation of twenty per cent of the economy, a Welfare State, full employment, regional development meant that the bleak world of the Poor Law, the 'dole' and the means test passed away unlamented. Despite the external weakness of the post-war economy, a bold policy of reform went through – certainly, much assisted by the massive assistance received from the United States under the Marshall Aid programme. In addition, there were huge transformations carried out in external policy with the formation of OEEC and NATO, and in the Commonwealth with the transfer of power in India, Burma and Ceylon, and major development

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<sup>5</sup> See 'The Bristol Giant', my review of Adonis' *Labour's Churchill*, 2020 in *Finest Hour – The Journal of Winston Churchill and his Times* 188 (Second Quarter 2020) : 33.

<https://winstonchurchill.org/publications/churchill-bulletin/bulletin-146-aug-2020/the-bristol-giant/>

programmes in east and west Africa and the Caribbean. Britain did not experience the traumas of decolonisation that France was to undergo in Algeria and Indo-China, and Portugal to experience almost everywhere. Only in Palestine was there long-lasting failure, whose consequences are still alarmingly evident in our world today. But here it is only fair to mention that responsibility for this lies predominantly with a much earlier British government, that of Lloyd George in 1917 where rival ambiguous pledges given to Jews and Arabs alike in the Balfour Declaration left a totally insoluble legacy. A hundred years of bloodshed resulted.

Further, if there were gaps in Labour's manifesto in 1951, its central achievement survived and created a new social fabric in Britain. The successor Conservative governments in office for the next thirteen years retained most of Labour's inheritance. Much of the nationalised industry (road haulage and iron and steel excepted), the Welfare State and Keynesian policies to promote full employment continued until the Thatcher counter-revolution of the 1980s. A moderate centrist policy of 'Butskellism' prevailed. 'One-nation Conservatives' of the type of Butler, Eden, Macmillan and Heath were all anxious to respond to changing popular demands for social justice, Iain Macleod was notably protective of the NHS, while even the aged Churchill was anxious to bow out with a more benevolent public image than those left by memories of Tonyandy and the General Strike. This was at a time when Labour seemed to have run out of ideas after completing its mission of 1945. The socialist advance seemed to have reached a dead end. As Disraeli said satirically of Gladstone in 1874, they were 'exhausted volcanoes'. Not until the Thatcher era was a neo-liberal response with a radically different perspective dominant which condemned the 'dependency culture' of the Welfare State and State planning as dangers to public morale. And one of Mrs. Thatcher's more memorable observations was 'the national Health Service is safe with us'. What Paul Addison defined as 'Attlee's consensus' [*The Road to 1945* : 270-278] had almost become a new orthodoxy or article of faith. And if the NHS was ever unsafe, there was always stout defiance by its most stalwart of defenders, the British Medical Association.

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In the 2019 General Election many believed that a new version of the Attlee government's programme was being put forward. Labour's campaign and manifesto, under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, a man almost old enough to remember the Attlee years personally, offered new radical, ambitious programmes of radical reform. There would be a return to nationalisation headed by the railways, there would be higher rates of tax for a wide-ranging, ambitious social programme, and more radical proposals such as the abolition of the 'public schools' and university tuition fees, a chicken in every pot, not to mention free broadband in every computer. But it failed to enthuse the electors and Labour ended up with only 203 seats, the worst result for the party since the war, with the Conservatives winning an 80-seat majority. It came on the back of heavy losses in local government and European elections, the decline of social democratic parties in every country in Continental Europe save for Spain, and of course the defeat of European sympathisers in the Brexit referendum in 2016, when many leading figures in the the party showed themselves no more zealous for the European union than their predecessors had been in considering the Schuman Plan in 1950. Labour's leadership in 2019 in any case had nothing like the authority or prestige enjoyed by Attlee ('Citizen Clem'), Morrison, Bevin, Cripps or Bevan. Corbyn himself, an elderly fellow-traveller with dated sympathies for Russia and South American dictatorships, inspired little trust. Unlike Attlee, or even Bevan, he did not sound like any kind of patriot. His international views reflected anti-American and anti-Israeli prejudices. Nor did the programme win much support. A huge programme, poorly costed, did not win great endorsement, while nationalisation lacked the appeal it had once had in a nation rebuilding from the rubble after the war. If the programme had moved on, so had the electorate. Psephologists showed that Labour's core vote no longer was based on the mass working class, much of which had broken up after decades of industrial decline, especially in areas of heavy industry. The miners of Durham or South Wales no longer ran up celebratory flags to herald the triumph of socialism because there weren't any miners left. Labour's strength now lay, bizarrely, in the A, B and C1 social groups,

largely middle-class professionals in the cities and London, more educated, more ethnically mixed, and also younger, no longer looking to ancestral memories of the depression years [Talk to the Labour peers by Peter Kellner, February 2020]. A more hopeful portent was the growing support amongst women: in the leadership contest in early 2020, five of the six candidates were women. Ethnic minorities were also more prominent and vocal.

But it no longer appeared likely that a programme couched in class-war rhetoric opened up the road to electoral victory. Another important factor was that the voters, especially in Scotland, had for many years rebelled against centralised rule based on Westminster. They felt excluded. Scotland, the homeland of Keir Hardie, Ramsay MacDonald and the 'Red Clydesiders', an impregnable bastion of Labour's traditional 'red wall' was no longer Labour territory. Its world view was dictated by considerations of nationhood, not of class. Labour required a new understanding of its electorate and their felt needs, and leaders freed from antique doctrines of a distant era. But that did not mean that a left-wing programme would no longer find support. After all, Bevan and the National Health Service ideal had retained their magic, decades after the event. Attlee himself was regarded as a man of the left. The party needed to find a new message of hope, a humanised capitalism but fired by the old passion for social justice, and a credible economic message not buried in technocratic managerialism or disinterred Marxism. Labour's approach towards business and technical modernisation should be more intelligently defined, not drowned in ancient clichés. The urgency and immensity of the task was sharply revealed in the electoral results of 2019. The message provided was stark. Labour and the left required a total revitalisation in their purposes and their ideas to face the future with confidence, as it had once done in the era of the uncharismatic but utterly trustworthy 'Citizen Clem' [Bew, 2012]. Otherwise it would be left with no future at all. Perhaps the election of a new centrist leader, Keir Starmer, in April 2020, along with the social solidarity created by the battle against the scourge of the coronavirus, offered new hope that it might do so, three quarters of a century on from the 'Legend of '45'.