

ROBERT CROWCROFT

# ATTLEE'S WAR

WORLD WAR II AND THE  
MAKING OF A LABOUR LEADER



I.B. TAURIS

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# Abbreviations

AEU	Amalgamated Engineering Union
AHRC	Arts and Humanities Research Council
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
HC	House of Commons
LCC	London County Council
LLP	London Labour Party
LPACR	<i>Labour Party Annual Conference Report</i>
LSE	London School of Economics
MFGB	Miners' Federation of Great Britain
NCL	National Council of Labour
NEC	National Executive Committee
NHS	National Health Service
NUDAW	National Union of Shop Distributive and Allied Workers
NUR	National Union of Railwaymen
PLP	Parliamentary Labour Party
RAF	Royal Air Force
TGWU	Transport and General Workers' Union
TUC	Trades Union Congress
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VE Day	Victory in Europe Day (8 May 1945)

# Acknowledgements

This book grew out of a Ph.D. on Labour Party politics between 1939 and 1945. In my view, one problem with our impressions of Westminster during the war – and this has solidified into a conviction in the process of adapting the thesis into a book – lies in the *texture* of the previous literature. Most of those works take on a markedly sunny and cheerful hue. Wartime politics comes to appear overly optimistic. To me, the documents convey a very different impression: it is of dark, swirling, forces at work, endless uncertainty and political titans doing battle. The period is at once oppressive and exhilarating. Frankly, it has always felt utterly Wagnerian in its atmospherics. I hope that this monograph captures one aspect of that story – the rise of Clement Attlee to a position of pre-eminence in the British polity.

I take this opportunity to thank the various archivists and library staff who helped to facilitate the research, as well as the bright sparks at the National Archives who put the Cabinet papers for 1939 to 1945 online, a genuinely invaluable resource. Let us all hope that the online national records are expanded further in the years to come. The AHRC generously funded my Ph.D. over three years, for which I express my gratitude. Ms Joanna Godfrey at I.B.Tauris has consistently been a fantastic source of help as my editor. Professor Kevin Theakston and Professor Philip Williamson examined the Ph.D. thesis, and the former gave helpful advice on the adapted version. I am deeply indebted to Professor John Charmley for comments on the manuscript and other acts of generosity. I should also express my affection to students and former students – some of them now good friends – who offered amusement and stimulation, especially Mr Thomas Dawn and Mr David Lyons. Teaching is a unique pleasure (why so many people do not like doing it is baffling to me), and I have always treasured the weekly doses of outrage and the shredding of the liberal and peacenik conscience.

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# Introduction

In July 1945 the Labour Party secured its first ever majority in Parliament and formed a government that remains, depending on one's perspective, either the finest or the most destructive in the twentieth-century history of these islands. Major reforms – economic, industrial and social – were enacted and the powers of the British state expanded to reflect a new faith in the ability of government to solve problems once believed intractable. The Prime Minister of that government, Labour leader Clement Attlee, became a political legend. His only modern peers in that regard are Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher. Attlee was recently voted the most successful Prime Minister of the twentieth-century,<sup>1</sup> and yet he remains the most poorly understood senior politician of the whole era due to his utter lack of charisma, 'diffident' manner and air of a 'bank manager'.<sup>2</sup>

But the position that Labour won in 1945 did not just fall into its lap; the party and its leaders had played a critical role in the Churchill coalition ministry that guided Britain through the Second World War. Previously, nearly all political historians have explored whether the conflict facilitated a policy 'consensus' between Labour and the Conservatives on a mixed economy and an expanded welfare state that lasted until the election of Mrs Thatcher in 1979.<sup>3</sup> Part of this has been an examination of the development within Labour's institutional structure in the years prior to the defeat of Hitler of the policies that would be enacted in the 1945 government.<sup>4</sup> Extensive work has also been conducted on explaining the 1945 general election result.<sup>5</sup>

This book offers a fresh perspective on wartime politics by concentrating attention for the first time on the extent to which the years 1939 to 1945 marked a decisive political shift towards the Labour Party, and the role in that process of Attlee. The shift in question was much more than controversial policies like state intervention in industry coming to be regarded as common sense under the pressures of war. It instead represented a fundamental realignment of British politics. It was,

moreover, a transformation driven through by the Labour leaders themselves, particularly the much maligned and misunderstood Attlee. As such, the book poses questions that allow the familiar landmarks of this period to be analysed in new ways. Labour's impact on the political world was fundamental and systemic. Attlee and other colleagues in the Churchill coalition – particularly union boss Ernest Bevin, the wartime Minister of Labour, and Attlee's great rival Herbert Morrison, the Home Secretary – assumed the central role in a reconstruction of the British state and the establishment of new doctrines and practices under which the country was governed. The apparatus and boundaries of government were hugely expanded. The transformation these men wrought had an impact that lasted much longer than just one generation of Labour leaders; the legacy of their wartime activities remained in place until at least 1979 and arguably afterwards. Moreover, Attlee was personally central to achieving this change in his party's fortunes. His leadership style – consistently elusive to historians – enabled Labour to dominate party politics between 1939 and 1945. In fact, Attlee's ascendancy within the government and over his own party was possibly the most significant force in shaping the entire direction of wartime politics. He played the principal role in enhancing Labour's negotiating position for office in the 'phoney war' of September 1939 to May 1940, and secured considerable leverage for the party with the formation of the Churchill coalition. Between 1941 and 1945 Attlee led the way in a revolution in British government and the growth of the state; he helped guide the coalition in the direction of new, and social-democratic, politics; and he was the most energetic figure from either party in seeking to bolster the electoral arrangements that underpinned the structures of cross-party alliance. None of this has been recognized by historians, who have downplayed Attlee's importance during the war. Reassessment of this alters our perception of the period as a whole.

Once within sight of real power, the ineffective Leader of the Opposition of the 1930s gave way to a man who became the key figure in the course, and outcome, of wartime British politics. This book seeks to address the failure to appreciate the significance of Attlee by making the case for a new perspective on politics before 1945. Attlee's impact on British politics was extensive; more than 60 years later, he remains the embodiment of an era. Yet, scholars have still proven unable to grasp his essence as a political operator. The bottom line is that no political history

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of the war has treated Attlee as central. This book makes the claim not only that he was central, but also that insights gleaned from the war perhaps represent the key to understanding his career as a whole.

### **Wartime politics and the impact of Labour**

In the years before 1939, Labour had always been a minority party; two brief spells in office without a Commons majority seemed to disprove the idea of an inevitable ‘march of Labour’. During the war this all changed. Yet, this was neither the result of a convergence of circumstances nor the emergence of a new received wisdom. It was not simply because of blows to the credibility of the Conservative Party, signified by the failure of appeasement, or even about national unity or political necessity. It instead represented fundamental change wrought by deliberate political action.

At a time when cultural history is in the ascendant, and political history is all too often the history of ‘political culture’, that is an important point.<sup>6</sup> The impact of the Labour leaders on the political system between 1939 and 1945 conveys much to support the argument that I, and others, have mounted for a reassertion of the value of traditional ‘elite’ studies in political history.<sup>7</sup> It is also clear that most contemporary studies of elite politics are woefully under conceptualized and content merely to tell a story, any story. The case can be made that the war was perhaps the most significant instance of political strategizing and calculated scheming in twentieth-century British politics, and all carried out under the guise of coalition. Yet, the events considered have never been interpreted from this perspective. To be sure, an attempt to retell well-established tales about the war would not be worth writing. This book aims at doing something else. Labour’s wartime transformation represented one of the most important political turnarounds of modern history, and the pre-eminent role that the party’s senior figures – particularly Attlee – played in achieving this warrants recognition. In its emphasis on strategy and tactics, and in exploring the threads that tie action together, the book’s assumptions are largely those of the ‘high politics’ approach associated with Maurice Cowling.<sup>8</sup> That sits within a larger ‘Tory’ school of political history, which offers a corrective to triumphalist (translated: liberal and socialist) accounts of developments in British politics since the seventeenth century, where ‘public opinion’, or the ‘people’, in different forms, ultimately win out and in which public opinion and the people are usually – and not coincidentally – found to conform to left-wing totems.<sup>9</sup> In the alternative ‘Tory’ approach, change emanates from the centre.

Something deeper also informs that interpretation of politics – a specific worldview and belief about the nature of man. It is the assumption that at the core of human conduct sits what Augustine labelled *libido dominandi* – a thirst for power and authority, for honour, recognition and to shape the world to reflect one's own outlook – and that this offers powerful insights into politics.<sup>10</sup> Think of the second book of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, and Calvin's overarching argument that the appetite dominates the intellect.<sup>11</sup> A Christian view of man's conduct offers the conviction that 'The Lord knoweth the thoughts of man, that they are vanity';<sup>12</sup> and 'every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.'<sup>13</sup> Politicians are prideful and intent on reworking the world to satisfy their own desires. I have participated elsewhere in work exploring the merits of a Christian worldview in fashioning an intellectual paradigm quite at odds with more recent, secular, mental tendencies.<sup>14</sup> Of course, most modern thinkers – with their core belief in the potential for human fulfilment – share both a Platonic optimism and a Hegelian concept of progress, and display little sympathy for such ideas. In being that way, however, they miss something important. After all (to take one of the more obvious examples), did not these very same assumptions about the nature of politics – the primacy of individual interest and faction over principle and virtue – provide the whole rationale for the framing of the American Constitution and the contents of *The Federalist*?<sup>15</sup>

Adopting a distinctive view of political practice, this book examines leadership in the raw. It has an analogous method not only to Cowling but also to more recent 'high politics' work of a similar vein by Richard Shannon on the Conservatives under Salisbury, and by Jeremy Smith on the Conservatives and Ireland prior to 1914.<sup>16</sup> In focusing on leadership, it concentrates on how leaders achieve their goals, how they have to face in several directions at once and on the issues that confront them in each.

This is a salient point. Both before and after taking Labour into the coalition, Attlee and his colleagues placed Labour in a political straitjacket. That quickly produced a tide of discontent that tested Attlee's leadership to the limit. Most of their followers simply did not appreciate the tightrope of difficulties that Attlee and other Labour ministers were compelled to walk. What followed were recurrent outbreaks of bitter disillusionment with Attlee's suddenly authoritarian, brook-no-complaints manner. Within the government, Attlee led the way in pursuing a distinctive Labour agenda and engaging in belligerence towards the

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Conservatives. Attlee and the Labour ministers thus had to carry out a delicate strategy in highly restrictive conditions. It was an under-appreciated political triumph. Against this backdrop, Herbert Morrison determined to exploit the political tensions of the war to seize Attlee's job. The two decades-long struggle between the pair was at its most intense here. The outcome was a series of high stakes, tactically complex conflicts between Attlee and those who wished to change Labour's course, challenge his strategy of alliance with the Conservatives, or remove him altogether. Morrison exploited the unpopularity of some of Attlee's decisions to fashion a unique credibility for himself as the heir to Labour's soul in a protracted bid to unseat the leader. The importance of these issues in shaping wartime politics, not just in the Labour Party but also across the broader political nation as a whole, has not previously received adequate attention. They were in fact the most significant political conflicts in Britain after the fall of Chamberlain and dominated politics for considerable periods between 1939 and 1945. The Attlee–Morrison rivalry, for instance, terminated in a struggle for the keys to 10 Downing Street in July 1945. Furthermore, the extent to which Attlee was the central player from either party in the attempts to plan for, and mould, the shape of postwar politics – particularly in struggling to create the conditions under which the cross-party alliance could be prolonged after the war – has not been understood.

As already suggested, the book makes the case that the years 1939 to 1945 marked, in effect, a seizure of power by the Labour Party and its leaders. Wartime political history has not previously been studied in quite this way, but the possibility has significant explanatory force. In essence, the present account deals with both Labour and government politics in parallel and as part of addressing the same problem – Labour's growing political dominance. Whereas previous historians have studied 'policies', this book analyses 'politics' and uses it to craft a fresh interpretation of the period, breaking new ground by integrating questions about the upheavals of the era as much within 'parties' and 'personalities' as 'policies'. The intended result is an account that necessitates the larger political dynamics of the era be rethought.

Churchill's shadow looms large and dominates one component of the historiography;<sup>17</sup> the other was best articulated by Paul Addison and is the issue of 'consensus', specifically whether the coalition produced a new set of core agreements between the main parties that was carried into the

postwar era – over the welfare state, nationalization of industry, Keynesian economics and a health service – until the advent of Thatcherism.<sup>18</sup> Addison worked in close collaboration with Angus Calder and together the two forged an enduring orthodoxy about the war. Historians have not broken free from the framework they established and have overwhelmingly tended to engage with the consensus question, either for or against the thesis. Kevin Jefferys and Stephen Brooke provided the most persuasive statements of the case against consensus, arguing that fundamental disagreements still remained between the parties during the war.

Addison and Jefferys, despite their conflicting opinions, dealt with the evolution of government policy and the coalition's response to the challenges and pressures – as well as opportunities – it faced.<sup>19</sup> Yet, both paid less attention to the importance of the political parties during the war, placed insufficient emphasis on the interplay between government and party and badly neglected the role of Attlee. In addition, neither noted the extent to which Labour came to dominate British politics between 1939 and 1945 and the endless strategizing conducted to that end by Attlee and the rest of the party's ministers. Jefferys acknowledged that by 1940 there was established 'a pattern of coalition politics in which each side constantly sought to maximize party advantage',<sup>20</sup> but he failed to pursue what that meant in practice; neither he nor Addison charted the war as a Labour-directed reshaping of British politics.

Brooke's work is the only previous treatment of Labour's role in domestic politics during the war. Brooke – unlike Addison and Jefferys – dealt with policymaking and development within the Labour movement itself rather than the government. He showed how Labour evolved the policies that it would implement in the 1945 government, and suggested that Labour was a far from happy party before 1945. Moreover, Brooke sided with Jefferys in challenging the consensus thesis, arguing that tensions within the Labour movement over policy fatally undermine any idea of an overarching agreement with the Conservatives. The party's 1945 general election victory has also generated considerable psephological analysis.<sup>21</sup> Trevor Burridge, meanwhile, offered an epilogue to the debates over rearmament in the 1930s by examining the development of the party's perceptions of foreign affairs after 1939.<sup>22</sup>

The one major exception to the tests of 'consensus' is a quite different, recent, work by Andrew Thorpe on the organizational base of the parties

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between 1939 and 1945.<sup>23</sup> In it he adopted a perspective that facilitates a fresh understanding of political developments; he suggested much in a methodological sense as well. Importantly, Thorpe highlighted the immovability of 'party' from the political scene, a point that will have ramifications for the closing stages of the account that follows. He also stressed the need to move beyond old frameworks and into fresh interpretative territory.

It is clear that, in seeking to prove or disprove consensus, the rest of these works exist within the analytical paradigm established by Addison and Calder.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, they concentrate overwhelmingly on policy; but what about the role of political strategizing, creative leadership and the purposes behind decision-making? By the same token, to what extent can a reassessment supply a fresh perspective about the degree to which the war represented a deliberate reshaping of the political environment by the Labour Party's most senior figures? The idea that the position the Labour leaders found themselves occupying in 1945 did not just come to them, but had to be made, deserves serious consideration. This book attempts to be the first to transcend the arguments about 'consensus' and place emphasis on alternative ideas in explaining politics before 1945. Disregarding the consensus thesis does not entail questioning its importance or criticizing Addison's work. *The Road to 1945* is one of the best monographs on any era of British history. But it was written more than thirty years ago and the arguments it spawned have been raging for that long. It is a period ripe for reassessment. The book works to address this by integrating the government and the Labour Party together for the first time to give a proper analysis of Labour's trajectory, as well as highlighting elements and events that add fresh themes to our perspective on wartime politics. It seeks to tie together the threads of political action and describe a new structure to politics before 1945.

For instance, each of the standard texts on the period, Addison, Brooke and Jefferys, neglected the approach taken by the Labour Party and its leaders in both the phoney war of 1939 and the first year of the coalition. Addison and Jefferys focus on the erosion of Chamberlain's support in the first period, and then the readjustment of the Conservative Party and the consolidation of Churchill's authority in the second. Even Cowling failed to spot what Labour was up to.<sup>25</sup> This book will address this oversight by concentrating attention on the strategy and tactics of Labour's senior figures in these crucial two years. Then, from 1941, it will



show how the Labour ministers and other representatives of the party took the reins of British government in unprecedented ways, their ruthless attitudes towards their own party, the conflict for the Labour leadership between Attlee and Morrison, and how the electoral basis of the coalition became a subject of intense controversy that effectively all senior British politicians hoped could be fashioned into an ongoing alliance *after* victory over Hitler.

What emerges is a quite different sense of politics in the period before 1945 and one that, moreover, serves to answer many longstanding questions about Attlee as a leader. Though it does not engage with the consensus thesis, some parts of the analysis will support it; others will call it into question. Others show how, in some respects, consensus perhaps ran deeper than even Addison suggested. But whatever happened during the war – consensual or otherwise – it did not simply emerge because of the national emergency, and new ideas such as Keynesianism. It came together because the Labour ministers moulded it out of the British state and national politics. The most useful explanations for the momentous political changes of the 1940s are not found in the 1945 election results, so easily reversed six years later. The real story can instead be located here, during the war.

## **The rise of Attlee**

Despite being granted secular sainthood by those sympathetic to ‘progress’, Clement Richard Attlee was the most puzzling major British politician of the last century. He has given rise to greater misunderstanding than any other leading politician has during that time, and no satisfactory account of his success has ever been established. The longest serving leader of a political party during the century, Attlee was at the head of the Labour Party for two decades, from 1935 to 1955. A Cabinet minister between 1940 and 1951, in the Churchill coalition he played an integral role on the home front and running the machinery of government. His doctrinal instincts were those of Green; his political methods those of the planner; and his temperament that of the military officer. And at the end of the Second World War, after leading Labour to victory in the July 1945 general election, Attlee became Prime Minister of the most famous government of the whole century, attempting to reconstruct Britain in an unprecedented series of economic, social and political reforms. His frontline career extended from the deprivations and