

## **INNER TEMPLE READER'S LECTURE SERIES**

**Lecture by The Rt Hon Jack Straw**

**5<sup>th</sup> October 2015**

**CLEMENT ATTLEE**

It was a time when the Labour Party was led by a pacifist. A huge row had been brewing for months over the Party's defence and foreign policy – and was coming to a head at its Party Conference. Should it, or should it not, support military intervention by the international community to stop naked aggression in North Africa by a dictator?

From vacillation by the leader came rebellion in the ranks. The party was facing (further) annihilation at the polls.

A trade union General Secretary, powerful, irascible, barged his way to the rostrum. The party's leader, he charged, was "taking the Labour Movement in an absolutely wrong position to be hawking your conscience round from body to body asking to be told what to do with it." Within the week Lansbury was gone.

This, however, was not 2015, but 1935. The party leader was George Lansbury, aged 76, rather than 66. Worshipped by many of the party faithful, a "man of principle" Lansbury was a committed Christian pacifist who in 1933 had said that "I would close every recruiting station, disband the Army and disarm the Air Force. I would abolish the whole dreadful equipment of war and say to the world: "Do your worst". At that stage Lansbury was riding a popular anti-war sentiment. The Oxford Union had earlier in the year passed its resolution that it would "in no circumstances fight for King and Country".

By 1935 however the mood had changed. Adolf Hitler was consolidating his power, and widening his ambitions. Benito Mussolini had invaded Ethiopia (then Abyssinia) whilst the Labour Party's conference was in session. Lansbury and some colleagues – Sir Stafford Cripps included – were opposed to any military intervention, and sanctions, by the League of Nations. The trade unions, in those days part of the stable ballast of the party, were appalled by their party leader's position. Walter

Citrine, the TUC general secretary, commented that Lansbury "thinks the country should be without defence of any kind ... it certainly isn't our policy."

The trade union leader who delivered the *coup* against Lansbury was Ernest Bevin, the greatest trade union leader of all time, founder of what is now the Unite union. Self-educated, with great self-awareness ("I'm one in a million"), Bevin had contempt for what he saw as effete middle-class intellectuals for whom politics was ultimately a self-indulgent hobby. But Bevin was no inverted snob, and recognised that if the party was to rebuild itself from the disaster of the 1931 General Election – when it had been reduced to just 46 MPs – it needed serious people of talent from every background.

One of those was Douglas Jay – Wykemist, Fellow of All Soul's, and brilliant economist, then working as a journalist on The Times. Douglas was with Bevin immediately after Bevin's hatchet-job on Lansbury. Jay later told me that he asked Bevin who could replace Lansbury, given the paucity of talent in the tiny rump of the Parliamentary Labour Party.

"You see that little fella' in the corner? The bald one, with specs and a pipe? 'Im. "

One week later, on 8<sup>th</sup> October 1935, Lansbury resigned. The Conservative Leader, Stanley Baldwin, determined to capitalise on Labour's disarray, made it known that an election was imminent. "The little fella' with the pipe", Clement Richard Attlee, Haileybury, and University College Oxford, was duly elected interim Party Leader.

It was not quite as random a choice as Bevin had implied – Attlee had been Deputy Leader since 1932, and had been acting Leader for nine months in 1933 when Lansbury was recovering from an accident.

The 1935 general election took place on 14<sup>th</sup> November. Under Attlee's leadership Labour increased its share of the vote to 38% (a percentage point higher than Mr Cameron's winning share at the 2015 election), and obtained 154 seats. Attlee was now the Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

Clem Attlee had been born into a stable middle-class family based in Putney. His father, Henry Attlee, was a successful City solicitor with the firm of Druces and Attlee – still going strong in the City as Druces LLP. Henry Attlee was a man of predictable habit. He held morning prayers for his family and servants at 7.30.am precisely; took

the train at 9.00.am. He drank one glass of claret with his dinner, before retiring to his study to prepare for his next day's work.

With no burning ambition when he came down from Oxford in June 1904, Attlee decided to join the Bar, becoming a member of Inner that year. His father was so keen for him to succeed at the Bar that he bought him a share of shoot organised on the Sussex Downs by the Secretary of the Law Society. To broaden his understanding his father had him work in his office.

Attlee was pupilled to Theobald Mathew, in the chambers of Lord Robert Cecil KC, at 4 Paper Buildings. Mathew was the son of a High Court judge, and enjoyed writing literary and historical articles relating to the law. Mathew's later pupils included Sir Stafford Cripps, appointed by Attlee as Chancellor of the Exchequer in 194??, but with whom he had a complicated relationship, Quintin Hogg,(Viscount Hailsham) later Lord Chancellor, and Peter Thorneycroft, later Chancellor of the Exchequer.

After pupillage, Attlee joined the chambers of Henry Dickens, son of Charles, who had taken silk in 1892.

Those of us who were pupils in the early seventies, and who sometimes lamented the state of our bank balances, did not realise how lucky we were. Like many of my contemporaries, I was fortunate to have work almost everyday from the beginning of my second six months, even if payment came much later. Not so for young barristers at the beginning of the century.

Despite all his connections, Attlee found himself traipsing round the Assizes and Quarter Sessions of south-east England, but apparently received only a handful of briefs. Demoralised by this experience, and lacking a determination to make a career at the Bar, he began applying for other jobs.

In 1951, David Hirst – later a Court of Appeal judge – wrote to Attlee for his recollections of his early years as a barrister. Attlee replied by return of post from 10 Downing Street: "Dear Hirst, I remember nothing about my first year at the Bar. Yours sincerely, C R Attlee".

With a lot of spare time on his hands, Attlee began working as a volunteer at Haileybury House, one of a number of settlements set up in the East End by foundations like that of his former school. This one was in Limehouse, profoundly

deprived, which provided a range of activities for young people including drilling in the Cadet Battalion, bagatelle and boxing. In 1907 he took over as residential manager of the settlement on a modest salary. In 1909 on the death of his father, he ended his connection with his chambers.

Some politicians have been, as it were, born into their party – including me. I came from an active Labour family, and from a background where almost everyone voted Labour too. I have long thought that there is something particularly admirable about those who have come from different backgrounds, and who therefore have had to make a conscious moral and intellectual journey to their adopted political philosophy. Not always, but quite often, such individuals have a more articulated sense of what they want to achieve, and why, than those who have inherited their party affiliation.

Attlee quintessentially was one such. In the first decade of the century he made his journey to socialism – a term which he used without affectation or qualification to his death. His conversion was born of his experience in the East End, and of his belief that there was nothing God-ordained which required that there should be a settled social hierarchy of the “rich man in his castle/ the poor man at his gate/ God made them high or lowly/ and ordered their estate” to quote the verse now omitted from the hymn “All Things Bright and Beautiful”.

But alongside that more emotional experience, Attlee also exercised his critical faculties too – one key reason why he never became romantically attracted to the more extreme versions of socialism, of Bolshevism for example, and why, later, he was so strongly opposed to the approach of the British Communist Party, to Trotskyism, and to groups on the far left of his own party.

I do not however see Attlee’s socialism as a rejection of the values of his upbringing, but rather as an extension of those values. Attlee’s father was a traditional Protestant Christian, who was a strong “Gladstonian” Liberal, a philanthropist, with a strong sense of duty and public service.

That Attlee was at ease with upbringing is also shown by the fact that he lived the whole of his life wholly unapologetic that he was upper middle class. He never pretended to be what he was not. He never fell into that desperate trap of believing that he could represent those whose life chances were much less than his by masquerading as working class, or by adopting what we would now describe as an

“estuary accent”. He was punctilious in his manners, formal in his style; addressing most of his correspondents – as he did David Hirst – by their surnames. There was no agonising for him about private schools. He was strongly in favour of improving state education – and as Prime Minister ensured that the ground-breaking 1944 Education Act of the wartime coalition was properly implemented. But he was simply assumed that the “best men” would have gone to public school. He rather proudly produced a list – for his own use – of the public schools whose old boys had served on the Labour front bench<sup>1</sup>.

Eton headed the list with seven (who included Hugh Dalton); then came Haileybury (five), Winchester (including Cripps), Marlborough, Rugby, and St Paul’s (two each), with Harrow and five others having one each. John Colville, Private Secretary to Winston Churchill, concluded in his diary that under Attlee “the old school tie counted even more in Labour than Conservative circles”.<sup>2</sup>

After a happy period running Haileybury House, and a brief and unhappy period running the similar, but Liberal, Toynbee Hall, Attlee was appointed in 1912 by Sidney Webb to be a lecturer and tutor at the London School of Economics, which Webb and his wife Beatrice had founded. Through that position he met some of the towering figures of the early Labour movement, Keir Hardie, J R Clynes, Philip Snowden, and Lansbury. With that, and continued involvement in local politics in Limehouse, Attlee built a solid, if uninspiring reputation of his own within the movement.

When the first world war broke out, the left split, in party and in family. Ramsay MacDonald, pacifist chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party resigned. Attlee’s elder brother Tom, a Christian pacifist, declined to fight and later, when conscription was introduced, spent much of the remainder of the war in jail. By contrast, Attlee decided that fighting Germany’s aggression was a just cause. He had previously trained with his school’s cadets, in Limehouse, and with the Inns of Court Regiment. After some string pulling, he joined the South Lancashire Regiment, and by March 1915 had been promoted to Captain.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Jago, Clement Attlee, p 371 – data for all Ministerial offices, not just Cabinet.

<sup>2</sup> Colville, The Fringes of Power, p 578

Attlee had a 'good' war – and a lucky one. He saw active service in Gallipoli, Mesopotamia, and, at the end of the war, in France. He got dysentery in Gallipoli, was wounded in Mesopotamia, and injured by falling timber in France. On each occasion, he avoided – though not through any choice of his own – the subsequent intense fighting which caused high casualties in his battalion. At each stage he sought to get back to the front line. By the time of his demobilisation he was 'Major Attlee' – and so described himself in all his political campaigning in the inter-war years. His courageous war record meant that no one could ever suggest that he would duck difficult military decisions.

Attlee returned to local politics becoming Mayor of the London Borough of Stepney in 1919. He became MP for Limehouse in 1922, which he held continuously until 1950, and then following boundary changes MP for Walthamstow until he stood down as Party Leader in December 1955. He remains the longest serving Labour leader. His twenty years compares with Harold Wilson and Tony Blair, the next longest serving, who each managed thirteen years.

Attlee served as a junior Minister for War in the first Labour Government – 1924 – which lasted all of nine months. In the second Labour Government, which lasted all of two years, from 1929 to 1931, Attlee was served first as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and then as Postmaster General – where he did much to introduce a commercial approach to the Post Office, and to maximise revenue from the telephone – on which it, and its successor British Telecommunications enjoyed a monopoly until privatisation in the 1980s.

That second Labour government collapsed in 1931, when the once left-leaning pacifist leader Ramsay MacDonald threw in his lot with the Conservatives to lead a 'National Government' committed to an orthodox programme of austerity, with cuts in unemployment benefit and a continuing commitment to maintain the parity of sterling through the Gold Standard.

In the General Election which followed, Labour was reduced to a rump of 46 seats (though its 30.6% share of the vote was a sliver larger than the 30.4% which was achieved at the most recent General Election, when Labour secured 232 seats).

One of Attlee's more recent biographers, Michael Jago, entitled his book "Clement Attlee, The Inevitable Prime Minister".<sup>3</sup> Though I think Jago's is a good read, I disagree that there was anything inevitable about Attlee's rise. A better description might be the "improbable, but lucky" Prime Minister.

Attlee was lucky in the first war – though I'm sure it didn't feel like luck to be badly wounded as he was. He was lucky too in that 1931 election. Most of the better-placed candidates for leadership, to replace MacDonald, lost their Commons' seats and were therefore ineligible to stand. Attlee hung on.

After the 1935 election, some of those 'bigger beasts' returned to the PLP. Two of them Herbert Morrison (Peter Mandelson's grandfather), and Arthur Greenwood competed with Attlee for the leadership. Attlee got 43% of the first preferences, and won the run-off. He had carefully ensured that he had fewer enemies within the Party than either of the other candidates. But Herbert Morrison was to remain convinced that he, not Attlee, would be the better Leader – an ambition he continued to pursue over the years which followed.

Whilst Attlee benefitted from the despair in the Party caused by Lansbury's pacifism, and the latter's consequential refusal to accept that pacifism was no choice at all in the face of naked fascist aggression, Attlee's initial reaction as Leader to the then Government's decision to rearm was lukewarm; the party, he told the autumn 1936 Conference, was in favour of rearmament "consistent with our country's responsibilities, but he would not support the National Government's specific defence policy.

Just a year later, he had outflanked the Chamberlain government in its policy of appeasement, pouring scorn on Chamberlain's 'peace in our time' Munich agreement with Hitler.

Shortly after the Party Conference in late May 1939, Morrison tried again to replace Attlee, using an ally – Ellen Wilkinson – as a stalking horse. The attempt failed. Had there been a General Election in the following months – as would have happened but for the declaration of war on 3 September – and whether Labour had done badly

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<sup>3</sup> Biteback, 2014

or well, Morrison, and maybe others, would have tried again to unseat Attlee, and could have succeeded.

But war was declared. Attlee – Major Attlee – with his exemplary record from the first war, and deep understanding of military strategy, was by far best qualified to lead the party. Initially he had the PLP enter into ‘loyal opposition’ with the National Government. He was convinced from the start that Chamberlain would have to go. So he did eight months later, following the censure debate on the Norwegian debacle.

When in May 1940 Churchill formed his coalition government, Attlee effectively became his deputy, a title which was formally bestowed on him in early 1942.

Attlee was a member of the three Cabinet Committees which ran the war. The War Cabinet, and the Defence Committee were chaired, and dominated, by Churchill. But Churchill was not even a member of the third – the Lord President’s Committee. That was responsible for virtually all domestic policy which was not directly related to military strategy. Attlee controlled this from the start, becoming its Chairman in 1943. This gave Attlee a crucial power base, which he used with great skill. He showed his unrivalled administrative abilities by streamlining the government’s processes.

Moreover, Churchill – now remembered as one of the Common’s greatest orators – rarely attended the House, finding it uncongenial in the early months of his premiership, so Attlee stood in for him, answering questions on Churchill’s behalf, and introducing much of the coalition’s early legislation.

Attlee knew that Churchill was critical to winning the war. In turn, from this power base, Attlee put himself at the centre of the campaign to win the peace.

From the conventional view of today, which places Churchill on a pedestal as the greatest Briton of the twentieth century, far above any other contenders, it may seem to some almost inexplicable that when Britain did finally win the war after six years of struggle, Churchill was unceremoniously turfed out of office, and Attlee and the Labour Party won a stumping landslide victory in his stead. It was far less a surprise at the time.

From the start of the war Attlee relentlessly positioned Labour as the party which could work in the national interest with its opponents to secure victory, but which was



the only party which could abolish unemployment and poverty and promote social justice and equality. Kenneth Harris, who wrote the best of Attlee's biographies, commented that Churchill "thought of visits to blitzed cities only as morale boosters", whilst Attlee combined "uplift with political commitment"<sup>4</sup>.

Attlee did not just talk about what Labour would do to deliver the peace. He ensured that the government machine would be utilised to prepare the most detailed plans for that peace. The Beveridge Plan published in December 1942 was at the heart of these plans. Beveridge's scheme – which still shapes our idea of the state's responsibility to sustain the welfare of its people – was groundbreaking. Social insurance would ensure a national minimum income, with a national health service, family allowances and economic policies to achieve full employment.

Churchill realised how dangerous Beveridge was to his party's future, and sought to have it pigeon-holed until after the war. Attlee showed great skill in outmaneuvering him, and in quelling a rebellion in Labour's own ranks for the immediate implementation whilst the war was on.

As I can testify, preparing for Government from the opposition benches is incredibly difficult. Attlee did not have to do this. The guts of his winning post-war manifesto was prepared from within government, under the noses of the majority party, the Conservatives, with whom Labour would be locked in combat in the election campaign.

Peace in Europe was secured in early May 1945. The General Election was held on 5<sup>th</sup> July, but counting was delayed for three weeks to allow for the votes of those serving overseas to be flown back to the UK.

Once the whistle for the campaign was blown, Churchill reverted to type – abandoning his one-nation position as a war leader, and instead became partisan, emotional – and, at times, ridiculous. Labour, Churchill charged, in a notorious radio broadcast at the start of the campaign "would have to fall back on some form of Gestapo", though "no doubt very humanely directed in the first instance". Attlee's riposte the next night was brilliant – almost instantly giving him the prestige and stature which had eluded Labour's leaders before.

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<sup>4</sup> Attlee, Kenneth Harris, Weidenfield, 1982

“When I listened to the Prime Minister’s speech last night...I realised at once what was his object. He wanted the electors to understand how great was the difference between Winston Churchill, the great war leader of a united nation, and Mr Churchill the Party Leader of the Conservatives. He feared lest those who had accepted his leadership in war might be tempted out of gratitude to follow him further. I thank him for having disillusioned them so thoroughly.”<sup>5</sup>

The two leaders then set off round the country. Churchill in a large car with a great entourage; Attlee alone save for his wife Vi, driving their own small car. Little wonder that Attlee was received sympathetically, in packed meetings, whilst Churchill faced considerable hostility.

In Gallup Polls from June 1943, Labour had been consistently ahead of the Conservatives, often by a margin of double figures<sup>6</sup>. But Churchill, and many others, still thought that his pre-eminence as war leader would win his party the election. He told the King on the evening of the counting day – 25<sup>th</sup> July - that he expected to win by between thirty and eighty seats.

By the afternoon of 26<sup>th</sup> July the results from around the country indicated that Labour was about to win a famous victory. It was obvious that Clement Attlee would become the first Prime Minister of a majority Labour government. Obvious – but not certain – for even as Churchill went to the Palace to tender his resignation and advise the King to invite Attlee to form an administration, Herbert Morrison was leading a cabal to prevent him from doing so, demanding a meeting of the Parliamentary Party to decide who should be leader.

On learning about this Bevin, ever loyal to the “little fella’ over there” instructed Attlee to “get in the car, Clem”. Vi, his wife, drove him to the Palace. He was Prime Minister before Morrison and the other plotters had finished their scheming. This cameo is an indication of the intrigue which Attlee had to endure, whether his Party was doing badly, or well.

The Labour Administration between 1945 and 1951 fundamentally changed the shape of Britain, and the role of the state. The National Health Service is its most enduring achievement, but so is the wider welfare state, which through all its

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<sup>5</sup> Labour Party election broadcast 5<sup>th</sup> June 1945

<sup>6</sup> British Political Facts 1900-79, Butler & Sloman, Macmillan, 1980

iterations has ensured that there is indeed a floor through which no one is allowed to fall, that we are all our brother's keepers. There were many other domestic achievements too which still survive. Overseas visitors are often struck by what a green and pleasant land in the United Kingdom, despite its high density of population. That's due to the planning system inaugurated by the Attlee Government.

One important achievement of the Attlee Government, though one which scarcely merits a mention in the indexes of many of the biographies was the 1949 Legal Aid and Advice Act, to provide not only for criminal defence but for a wide range of advice – and representation – in civil cases too. That major reform was secured when Britain faced the most severe economic difficulties. It's something of a paradox that its scope has been much reduced in recent years, even though we are significantly more prosperous than we were in the days of real austerity after the war. It is however worth putting this reform into perspective. Even ten years after the 1949 Act came in, just £2.2 million (between about £50 million and £110 million in today's money<sup>7</sup>, compared with £1.9 billion for the Legal Aid Agency in 2013/14.)

Labour was committed by Clause 4 of its then constitution to “secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry.... [by] the common ownership of the means of production distribution and exchange”. Though the non-Marxist wing of the party recognised that there had to be practical limits to the extent of nationalisation, there was a broad consensus which extended into the Conservative Party in favour of much public ownership, where this was “in the national interest”. There was surprisingly little sustained argument about the nationalisation of coal, gas, electricity, and the railways; the Post Office including telecommunications had always been in the public sector, and so had most water undertakings. The forerunner of BP had been nationalised<sup>8</sup> in 1913, and of British Airways in 1939.

The only area where there was intense partisan argument was in respect of iron and steel – where Labour's plans were overturned as soon as the Conservatives were back in office in the early 50's. But in respect of every other area of public ownership – including Thomas Cook, a chain of major hotels, and the Carlisle State Brewery – the 1951 – 1964 Conservative Government broadly left the portfolio of state industries untouched. And though Edward Heath did privatise Thomas Cook, and the

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<sup>7</sup> Depending on the method of calculation.

<sup>8</sup> Through a controlling 50.01% interest

Carlisle State Brewery, he nationalised both Rolls Royce and the huge car-maker British Leyland.

On foreign policy the one critical issue which Attlee delivered which Churchill could not was independence in India. Attlee was morally opposed to imperialism – and had built up a high level of expertise on India as a member of the Simon Commission in the late twenties. Though he was criticised for not gripping the issue early enough in his Premiership, his swift removal of Wavell as Viceroy, and his replacement by Mountbatten, was inspired. By then Attlee had accepted the inevitability of partition of the Raj, and that there was bound to be considerable violence when this happened. But that should not diminish the fact that, under Attlee, Britain voluntarily vacated this “jewel in the Crown” of its Empire; that the constitution which came to be agreed for India has stood the test of time; and that, thanks to Attlee, Pakistan (and later Bangladesh) and India became active members of the Commonwealth.

Britain in the immediate aftermath of the war was beset by challenges any one of which would have defeated a lesser man than Attlee. The country was almost bankrupt; in some respects rationing was tougher than in the war; the United States was determined ruthlessly to establish itself as the sole western super-power before providing much assistance to the UK – and Britain faced continuing strategic and military obligations in Europe, in the Middle East, and Asia. He was instrumental in persuading the US that its interests would continue to lie in Europe, through NATO; and he led the decision for the United Kingdom to develop its own atomic bomb.

It was on the Middle East that Attlee was least impressive. There never was going to be an easy solution to the desire of the Palestinians for independence, with that of Europe’s Jewish communities, displaced and violated by the holocaust for a homeland in Israel. Britain was reaping the whirlwind of the contradictory and ill-thought-through undertakings of the first world wars – of the Sykes-Picot agreement, the McMahon letters, and the Balfour declaration. Even so, Attlee’s footwork on the Middle East was leaden and uncertain – the opposite of how he had performed on India. As Gerald Kaufman commented, Attlee “betrayed the Jews without appeasing the Arabs”.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> In a review of Clem Attlee, by Francis Beckett, *Politico’s*, 2007

When, before I became a Minister, I read that the Attlee government had run out of steam because it was so tired, I felt an impatient lack of comprehension. I didn't do so after thirteen years as a Minister. I understood exactly. The burden of being a Minister in peacetime, when there are no existential threats to one's nation, are heavy enough. But our challenges were nothing compared to those of Attlee, Bevin, Morrison, and the others who had by 1950 been in office for ten years through some of the most difficult times ever to face this country.

Labour's majority of 180 was reduced to 5 in the 1950 election. But that belies Attlee's achievement – for, on an 84% turnout Labour gained 13.2 million votes – 46% share, compared with 11.5 million, of 40% for the Conservatives. In those days the quirks of our electoral system worked to the Conservatives' benefit.

Eighteen months later, Labour lost power altogether – though it increased its vote. It achieved 13.9 million votes, 49% of the electorate – compared with the Conservatives' 13.7 million, but the latter gained a majority of 16 seats.

It was the end of the Attlee government.

With his intense sense of public duty Attlee soldiered on as Leader of the Opposition until after the 1955 election, trying his best to manage a disappointed party riven not just by personal rivalries but by an ideological schism which did not start to fade until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Attlee was created an earl when he stepped down as Leader. He had been made a Bencher of Inner in 1946. Following the death of his wife, Vi, he moved into a four roomed flat at 1 King's Bench Walk. He died in his sleep in 1967. His funeral was held in the Temple Church on 11<sup>th</sup> October, and his ashes buried in Westminster Abbey a month later.

That Attlee was one of the twentieth century's great Prime Ministers is in my view beyond question.

The more intriguing question is whether a man of Attlee's personality – the "little fella in the corner" - could be Prime Minister today.

Attlee had unsurpassed administrative abilities for running government, and an instinctive appreciation that formal procedures – of Cabinet and Cabinet Committee

– needed to be respected. But he also understood that there were exceptional circumstances of national interest when these procedures had to be avoided. His decision to develop what became Britain's independent nuclear deterrent was taken entirely in secret, behind the back of most of his Cabinet colleagues. He manipulated the Estimates so as to conceal from Parliament £100 millions of expenditure on this programme<sup>10</sup>. Not for Attlee a vote on Trident's grandfather. The Commons did not even know that a choice was being made, still less that they were to be asked.

Both Margaret Thatcher, and Tony Blair might have been able to avoid some of the criticism of their informal "sofa" style of government had they followed Attlee's example. But the style of government is partly a matter of choice by the Prime Minister, partly a result of circumstances. As David Cameron and Nick Clegg discovered, where there is a coalition greater formality is essential. Attlee continued in his administration the habits with which he had become familiar in the wartime coalition.

Where I am less certain is whether someone of Attlee's personality type – the careful introvert, the man of few words – would be able to succeed today, would be able to tolerate the intense pressure of television and 24 hour rolling news.

It also doubt whether Attlee would have been able to sustain the relentless theatrical scrutiny of today's Prime Minister's Questions. It may sound like a trite point. It is not intended that way. PMQs, where the Prime Minister is expected to know the answer to everything which is happening in his or her government, is a relatively recent invention. It wasn't formalised until 1959, did not develop its bear-garden atmosphere until the Wilson/Heath clashes the early seventies, and was not of course broadcast on television until 1989. PMQs alone, but aided by the speed of modern communications, has allowed Downing Street – indeed required Downing Street – to extend its tentacles into any aspect of a Department's work. I'm far from sure that Attlee would have found the pressures of PMQs remotely comfortable, but nor would he have been able to resist them.

But I may be wrong about this. Perhaps the hardest thing for a latter day Attlee to do would have been to win a Leadership ballot within the Labour Party. If he had, then maybe the British public would have warmed to him, a walking embodiment of

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<sup>10</sup> See Harris, *ibid*, p 286

substance over style. If they had, Government, and governance would be the better for it.