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The end of the Attlee Government: a whimper not a bang

Robert Crowcroft and Kevin Theakston

The Attlee Labour government of 1945-51 ended more with a whimper than a bang. In contrast to the break-up of the MacDonald Labour government in 1931 there was no ‘bankers’ ramp’ or dramatic and overwhelming financial crisis. There was nothing like the self-destructive trade union protests and strikes of the 1979 ‘Winter of Discontent’ that fatally damaged Callaghan’s government. There was no electoral meltdown. Instead a small shift of votes – an average swing of just 0.9 per cent from Labour to the Conservatives – was enough to tip Labour out of office in the general election held in October 1951. On a high turnout Labour’s tally of votes had actually increased in absolute terms (to 13.9 million, compared to 13.2 million in the 1950 general election and 11.9 million in 1945) and it won 230,000 more votes (0.8 per cent) than the Conservatives, though the Conservatives came out ahead in seats, making 23 gains and ending up with a House of Commons majority of 17. It was a close-run defeat that seemed like a victory of sorts: the outgoing Labour leaders were relieved that it had not been worse (Hugh Dalton called the results ‘wonderful’), believed the Conservatives would quickly encounter economic and political problems, and thought (wrongly) they would be back in office sooner rather than later.¹

The end of the Attlee government was a process rather than an event, taking place over several installments (including the two general elections of 1950 and 1951) and with multiple background and contributory factors, both internal to the government and the Labour Party and external, in the shape of political and economic events and forces beyond its control or influence. The interaction between diverse

economic forces, social pressures, and political decisions is central to understanding the end of the Attlee government. For the first two years – up to 1947 – the Labour government was ‘triumphant and seemed unshakeable’, as one of its Conservative frontbench opponents put it.² It had a parliamentary majority of 146, pushed strongly ahead with its programme, and the Opposition were shell-shocked and ineffective. But from 1947 onwards the government started to run into difficulties and its reputation for competence took a battering as it struggled with economic crises and other problems (notably the fuel crisis and convertibility in 1947, and devaluation in 1949). There were Conservative opinion poll leads for most of the period from the second half of 1947 through to January 1950 and Tory advances at Labour’s expense in local government elections in 1947 and 1949, but, remarkably, Labour lost no parliamentary by-elections to the Conservatives (though often seeing large swings against them). However the general context of ‘austerity’ and media and party-political criticisms of bureaucracy, nationalisation, government mismanagement, red tape, queues, shortages and rationing sapped Labour’s popularity. Added to this by the late-1940s, and very obviously in 1950-51, Labour seemed to have run out of steam, displayed few new policy ideas, its leaders were physically exhausted, and factional splits were emerging. Even so, its electoral support remained strong to the end, and particularly in its working-class heartlands.

The blame game

Numerous hypotheses have been put forward for the decline and fall of the Attlee government. In isolation, none of them are terribly convincing. There are the

ideologically-motivated explanations – which usually translate into a charge that Attlee’s administration was insufficiently ‘socialist’, and this sentenced it to a decline and fall worth of Gibbon. Ralph Miliband, the most influential example of this tendency, blamed Morrison’s ‘consolidation’ approach to policy post-1948 as lacking in energy and drive; the party leaders proved to be compromisers with capitalism.³ Miliband also attributed the government’s defeat to ‘business and financial interests’ (especially steelmakers, insurance companies, and Tate & Lyle), which behaved exactly as capitalists are supposed to according to Marxist theory and poured ‘enormous resources’ into a propaganda campaign to promote ‘free enterprise’ and discredit nationalisation.⁴ Thus, Labour’s aspirations were attacked and the public misled. Moreover – and equally predictably in the context of a Marxist framework – according to Miliband the Labour Party and even the British state itself (through its information services) proved to be no match for the arrayed representatives of the capitalist order – the Conservative Party, big business, and ‘their public relations experts’.⁵ Perry Anderson echoed this argument, seeing a successful capitalist campaign to shift the ‘equilibrium’ back toward the ‘hegemonic class’.⁶ ‘Socialism had never been on the agenda of the Attlee government’, which failed to modify ‘the basic coordinates of British capitalism’.⁷ David Coates later put forward a similar analysis of the failures of ‘labourism’.⁸

Contemporaries had their own take on things. They were keen to use the party’s decline to bolster their positions in increasingly fraught political feuds. For instance, following the 1950 election the result was instantly explained by the emerging factions according to their own perspectives. For Bevan, the collapse of Labour’s majority was an indictment of ‘consolidationism’. Yet the party leadership drew precisely the opposite conclusion from the results: the fact that Labour’s vote

held up was interpreted as an endorsement of consolidation. That meant that the party should move further away from overt ‘socialism’. The leaders also reckoned that offensive speeches by Bevan (that the middle-classes really complained about austerity because they desired servants to order around, and that Conservatives were ‘lower than vermin’) had cost the party at least two million votes.⁹ Whatever their merits, these were, of course, self-serving explanations.

No more worlds to conquer?

By 1948-49 the Attlee government had largely passed the legislation it was elected to enact. Landmark reforms – on the welfare system, health, public ownership, and more – were being implemented. Moreover, many of these innovations were things that the Labour party had been seeking since its inception; they carried a powerful and visceral appeal for the party. But passing legislation based on these aspirations generated an acute problem. A New Jerusalem did not suddenly spring up in the green and pleasant lands. Human nature did not change or improve, and people were not being remade as a result of government action. Britain was a bit different, to be sure, but not radically so. In essence, this was not what a socialist, or social democratic, country was supposed to look like. On one level, this highlights the inevitable gulf between intention and outcome in governing; and in the case of the Attlee government, the gulf was a profound one. Converting values and aspirations into, first, actionable policies and, second, social outcomes is rather more difficult than is popularly appreciated,¹⁰ and while Labour had certainly come up with the policies, the outcomes were less clear.

To be sure, all of this was not just the result of doctrinal exhaustion; 1947 was a horrendous year with food, fuel, and convertibility crises for Attlee and his colleagues to wrestle with. The government never recovered its sense of direction. But in sum it did mean that the Labour government was now out of fresh ideas. In a great burst of energy, in their first three years in power Attlee and his colleagues passed the measures they had set out to. There were no more crusades to launch, no enticing battles to fight, no dragons left to slay. Perhaps it is little surprise if they had exhausted their doctrines; Attlee and his most of his colleagues were products of the structures of authority in Britain and had little desire to modify them more than they had already. But for whatever reason, the Attlee government suffered the sense of deflation that often follows brilliant achievement in all walks of life. There were no more worlds to conquer; and plenty of Labourites wept over that fact, while others – including Attlee and Morrison – simply scratched their heads. Ever since the Attlee government, Labour has struggled to work out ‘what next?’ and craft a compelling vision of the future. Wilson plumped for ‘White Heat’ and Blair for the ‘personalisation’ of public services. But solutions to this problem have certainly proved hard to come by, and all have lacked the raw emotional appeal of those aspirations satisfied between 1945 and 1948.

Equally important as a disinclination to go further was the fact that Attlee and his colleagues were physically exhausted, if not broken, by their experiences. Most of the government’s senior figures had been in office continually since May 1940. A decade spent dealing, on a daily basis, with total war, its aftermath, and an ambitious legislative programme took its toll. There were few opportunities to recharge. The pressure was unrelenting as one crisis followed another. The senior figures were ageing and often in poor health. The vitality of formidable figures like Attlee, Bevin,

Cripps, and Morrison ebbed away – and with it the vitality of the government. By 1948, their best days were behind them: Bevin died in harness in 1951, Cripps a year later having been compelled to retire in 1950, while Attlee and Morrison suffered bouts of illness and hospitalisation. This issue of physical and mental decline has to be important to any persuasive account of the decline and fall of the Attlee government. John Charmley's view that the ministry was 'exhausted in mind, body and manifesto commitments' sums it up.¹¹ The crusading army of 1945 was reduced to a host of walking wounded by the end of the decade. Small wonder, then, that they were in no mood for new legislative offensives.

As a result, Labour's appeal to the public in the 1950 and 1951 elections was lacking in freshness and clarity. In both election campaigns Attlee largely opted to fight on the record of his government, combining this with suggestions that the Conservatives could not be trusted with the welfare state and the economy. But the socialist mind is one that demands constant forward movement and can rarely be satisfied; and it was precisely this crusading zeal which was lacking when the party submitted itself to the judgement of the electors. The party's manifesto for the 1950 election stood in stark contrast to the sheer scope of *Let Us Face the Future* and the election saw Labour's majority in the Commons collapse to just six. It was certainly a curious result. The party's share of the vote remained three percent higher than that of the Conservatives, but the proportion of non-manual workers voting Labour declined by ten percent on 1945 (from 55 per cent to 47 per cent) – a clear warning of the dissatisfaction with austerity.

Its drastically reduced majority after the 1950 election left the government hanging on to 'office without authority or power', as Dalton put it. He thought it was difficult to see 'how we can improve our position', feeling 'events moving against

us'.¹² Gaitskell thought that defeat next time was not certain, however, 'if we play our cards right' and 'if we can avoid giving unnecessary offence and quietly improve the economic position.'¹³ The second Attlee government certainly had few legislative achievements to its name and Attlee discovered no new sense of purpose for his administration. But in the short-term it was able to carry on, winning votes in parliament despite Conservative harassment, remaining popular in the polls, and presiding in the first half of 1950 over an improving economic situation (with the balance of payments moving into surplus, the announcement that Britain would make no further calls on Marshall Aid, production and exports strong, and 'points' rationing and petrol rationing ending). 'It looks as though those bastards can stay in as long as they like', Churchill complained at one stage.¹⁴ It was 'an entirely unforeseen external development'¹⁵ – the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 – that, we can see with hindsight, marked the beginning of the end for the Attlee government, the massive rearmament programme it triggered placing serious strains on both the Labour party and the national finances.

Another factor is that the government had – rather spectacularly – failed to play the redistribution game effectively. Although Edmund Dell argues 'this was not a cost which would have had to be paid by a more successful government',¹⁶ most historians and participants in the Attlee government acknowledge its importance. The 1945 boundaries probably favoured Labour but the 1948 redrawing of constituency boundaries played into Conservative hands, taking seats from Labour heartlands and rebalancing them to the more suburban areas. Those suburban seats were likely to prove more amenable to the Conservatives' message, and certainly did so in the context of austerity. The Nuffield election studies for the 1950 and 1951 contests found that the redistribution of seats offered the Conservatives an advantage of about

35 seats and 500,000 votes, accounting for between one-quarter and one-half of Labour's losses.¹⁷ In many cases, as Attlee acknowledged, the impact of redistribution was to transfer Labour voters from marginal constituencies to solid Labour seats, so that the party got bigger majorities in its strongholds and safe seats but lost out in the marginals. Of the 60 largest majorities in 1950, 50 were in Labour-held seats. 'We suffered from being too moral over that', Attlee later admitted.¹⁸ (Morrison's biographers talk of Labour's 'masochistic honesty' in implementing the boundary changes.)¹⁹ Labour polled 800,000 more votes than the Conservatives in 1950, a lead in votes, it has been calculated, which would have given the latter an overall majority of 65-70 seats – the redistribution of seats and the more 'efficient' distribution of the Conservative vote helping explain that discrepancy. If the 1950 election had been fought on the old boundaries it has been suggested that Labour would have won with a comfortable majority of about 60.²⁰

Attlee himself has to bear some responsibility for the government's problems. He had largely failed as Leader of the Opposition between 1935 and 1939, and was only rescued by the opportunities of war. The cunning, ruthless political operator of 1940-47 was in decline, his inadequacies and limitations more apparent. As Kenneth Morgan put it, he had invaluable qualities for running a government with an agreed programme when things were going well, but performed less well in crises that demanded energy, grip and ideas.²¹ Nor was he politically skilled on economic issues, the Achilles' heel of the government. Peter Hennessey notes that Attlee's lack of grasp on the British economy and economic diplomacy was 'a serious weakness'.²² The presentational, campaigning and communication aspects of politics had always been Attlee's weakest areas. He was best at managing (and controlling) those around him, not at 'the vision thing'. As leader and prime minister it was his responsibility to

instil a sense of purpose in his government, or at least find someone who could. Attlee had always relied on Morrison for that, but ‘consolidation’ was hardly a war cry fit to rouse the troops. His example shows that a prime minister does not necessarily have to give a strong policy lead or provide ideas and a vision for a government to be successful, provided that the Cabinet and the party have a sense of purpose and remain united – but that was not the case by 1950-51.

It was the February 1950 general election, not the October 1951 one, that destroyed the huge Labour majority won in 1945. Labour lost 78 seats while the Conservatives gained 88, Attlee’s majority in the House of Commons slumping to just six. As Edmund Dell has pointed out, ‘this was before the Korean war and before any Cabinet resignations had divided the party.’²³ The 1950 election has been described as ‘astonishingly ill-timed’²⁴ and Attlee, as prime minister, must carry the ultimate responsibility for that, though there had been a number of Cabinet discussions and ministerial exchanges about the next election from mid-1949 onwards. From May 1949 Bevan had been pressing for an early election as opposed to hanging on until 1950. Labour MPs, he believed, ‘will be getting nervy and demoralised and there will be no more really interesting legislation. We shall be marking time, and lose our power of manoeuvre.’²⁵ Gaitskell thought that either November 1949 or June 1950 would be the best dates, but not the period in between.²⁶ Morrison, who feared the party machine was not yet tuned up, initially sat on the fence but then came out in favour of delay.²⁷ But a crucial influence was Cripps, who refused (with threats of resignation) to produce a pre-election budget, the mixture of his moralism, personal strain, poor political judgement and fears for sterling, leaving the prime minister with no choice but to go to the polls at a rather unpropitious time. Polls in May 1950, after petrol had been de-rationed, suggest that if the election had been held later Labour

may have won with a majority of 40 or 50 seats in the House of Commons, a secure enough platform for the government to carry on longer than it did in fact do so in 1950-51.²⁸

Attlee can also be faulted for the poor timing of the October 1951 general election. The prime minister's innate conservatism and sense of propriety led him to conclude that the political uncertainty in the country had to be resolved before the king set off on a planned Commonwealth tour of six months' duration. Attlee had already forced the king to postpone the tour once (keeping him in the country for the 1949 Festival of Britain so as to maximise the financial opportunities accruing from the aura of monarchy) and thus decided that the election would have to take place in late 1951. (In the event, illness prevented the king from going on his tour and he died in February 1952.) Other ministers backed an autumn election but Morrison and Gaitskell were not confident about the prospects of defeating the Conservatives again and both advised soldiering on into 1952 in the hope that something – an economic recovery – would come up. But Attlee made the decision not to do so and called the election even though the state of the economy and the opinion polls (with the Conservatives enjoying an 11 per cent lead in September 1951) were not favourable. This was clearly an error; quite apart from the election, someone with Attlee's political antennae should have known that once out of office the splits in the party would develop into outright factional conflict. Writing in 1963, Richard Crossman blamed the prime minister for the election results: 'if only Mr Attlee had held on, instead of appealing to the country in the trough of the crisis, he would have reaped the benefit of the 1951 recovery'.²⁹

Party unity and discipline were coming under increasing strain towards the end of the government – as highlighted by the Gaitskell/Bevan split and Cabinet

resignations – but internal party problems did not until then damage the party's capacity to govern. Compared to other periods of Labour government, for most of the Attlee government the party was broadly united and relations with the unions were stable and supportive. Bevan in fact told the 1950 party conference that over the previous five years the party had achieved 'a greater degree of unity' than he had ever known, and the reason for that was 'we achieved it in activity. We are always better when we are getting on with the job.' Party solidarity was related therefore to the sense that the government was moving forward, and as it stalled in its final phase that loyalty and party support came under strain.³⁰

On the whole, the Parliamentary Labour Party 'presented few problems of management for the government down to 1951.'³¹ The Liaison Committee worked well as a bridge between ministers and MPs, standing orders were suspended, and Morrison set up seventeen specialist policy groups to keep backbenchers busy (though this experiment was not a success in the case of the foreign affairs group, which clashed with Bevin). There was some dissent and periodic rebellions by varying groups of MPs - mostly on foreign policy and defence issues – but no sustained and organised internal opposition endangering the government's majority or significant parliamentary revolt, even from the 'Keep Left' group. Party discipline had been a problem for MacDonald but, as Morgan noted, the Attlee government had little difficulty keeping the loyalty of its backbenchers on domestic issues down to and well beyond 1950 election. The wafer thin majority after 1950 actually assisted party management as backbench critics felt constrained to toe the party line in the face of increased Conservative pressure, though tensions were building up and some of Bevan's supporters started to snipe and mount attacks after his resignation in 1951.

In contrast to the damage they caused to the Wilson and Callaghan governments, relations between the government, the party and the unions were also generally good and close in this period. Lewis Minkin, the historian of the party-union relationship, labels these ‘the years of stability’ and ‘fundamental unity’ in the party-union alliance, based on a ‘tight alliance’ between the key union bosses (who were at this time on the right of the party) and the parliamentary leadership, and on a broad sense of union satisfaction with the achievements and record of the government (though there was increasing discontent with the wages freeze by the end of the government). Jonathan Schneer also noted the ‘overwhelming loyalty’ of the unions: ‘during 1945-51 the majority of trade unions gave the Attlee government massive, unswerving and crucial backing’.³² The union block vote was put firmly behind the leadership at the party conference, a body that gave little real trouble – Morgan calling it ‘docile and impotent’³³ – though a straw in the wind was the way in which places on the NEC constituency section increasingly fell to left-wingers from 1948 onwards. The Left was a more significant grass-roots presence in the constituency parties, some unions and the PLP than sometimes thought – and its criticism of and disaffection with government policies and decisions grew, particularly after 1949 – but it was never an organised force in this period.³⁴ Rank and file party membership increased after 1945, the union affiliated membership almost doubling to 4.9 million, with individual membership in the constituency parties increasing from 487,000 in 1945 to a peak of over 900,000. Party finances and the party organisation were solid enough, though Labour had a smaller membership than the Conservatives, fewer election agents around the country, and a smaller and less professional headquarters staff.³⁵

Despite this relative general stability within the Labour Party as a whole, the latter stages of the Attlee government did see an outbreak of serious fratricidal strife among senior members of the ministry.³⁶ It boiled down to a struggle for political ascendancy between the two leading lights of the 'next generation': Bevan and Gaitskell. Bevan, widely perceived as the architect of the new National Health Service in his role as Minister of Health, saw himself as having a claim to authority and future power in the Labour movement – especially when Attlee's generation left the scene. He had not as a minister encouraged left-wing backbench revolts against the government or dissent at the party conference, calling for solidarity, loyalty and discipline in the party.³⁷ But he deeply resented the emergence of the middle-class Gaitskell as a major figure in the government. As the Korean war placed grave burdens on the country's finances in the second half of 1950 (in August, it was decided to boost annual defence spending to £950 million, an increase of £210 million; in November, the Cabinet raised this £3.6 billion over three years; and in December the decision was taken to increase spending still further), relations between the two men began to break down.³⁸ Crucial to this was the appointment of Gaitskell as Chancellor of the Exchequer in October, when Cripps was compelled to retire. Bevan was furious, believing that Cripps had intended for him to have the job himself. He demanded that the post should have gone to someone 'who had some standing in the movement' (in other words, him), and rapidly started to 'behave very badly and alienate' his colleagues.³⁹

Gaitskell's appointment had therefore seemingly impeded the rise of the ambitious Bevan. It was not something that he ever forgave. Within weeks of Gaitskell's move to the Treasury Bevan was considering resigning, ostensibly over the issue of defence spending.⁴⁰ Crucially, though, Bevan's drive towards martyrdom

on the issue of rearmament only began after he had been snubbed and Gaitskell awarded 'his' job. Relations became truly poisonous in subsequent months, as the new Chancellor sought to raise money for defence spending by capping the costs of Bevan's NHS. Bevan was driven into a rage and began to oppose Gaitskell in Cabinet with venom. The issue at stake was deeply personal – Bevan's petulance was always to the fore, and it would be naïve to think that, even given Gaitskell's stubborn and inflexible nature, the Chancellor did not relish the opportunity to drive a rival out of office through provocative policies. Though Michael Foot and Philip Williams painted the struggle as an ideological conflict over the future of British socialism, and Kenneth Morgan likewise thought it 'calumny' to see the feud in terms of personal advancement, in reality it was always about who was on top, and who was not.⁴¹

In January 1951, a United Nations resolution introduced by the United States condemning China as an aggressor in Korea was the occasion for further rancour between the two men. As perhaps the most instinctively Atlanticist Cabinet minister, Gaitskell believed that Britain must support the resolution. But Bevan wanted to oppose it. He was developing a marked tendency to discover antipathy for any policy that Gaitskell supported. This was to see Bevan make some truly remarkable intellectual leaps in the next five years of party civil war, but in early 1951 Gaitskell was hardly likely to countenance capitulation to his rival as their rows over defence spending continued to rage; he thus exerted considerable pressure upon the Cabinet and ensured British support for the US position.⁴² Bevan was furious at having been bested yet again. A suitable pretext for revolt immediately arrived, when Gaitskell took the decision to increase defence spending to £4.7 billion over three years – up almost a third on what the Cabinet had previously agreed. The state of crisis persisted until March, when Gaitskell again rubbed salt in the wound by seeking to raise money

through imposing charges on certain NHS services – spectacles and false teeth. Gaitskell won acquiescence from the Cabinet for this, leaving Bevan looking positively ‘evil’ in meetings.⁴³ The Welshman finally exploded in March 1951 when Herbert Morrison got the Foreign Office in the wake of Bevin’s retirement. For the second time in six months, Bevan felt himself to have been snubbed for the two most senior posts in the government besides the premiership. Publicly threatening resignation if NHS charges were introduced, he lambasted Gaitskell as a ‘second Snowden’, and, after the Cabinet chose to rebuff his protests and endorse Gaitskell’s Budget, quit the government altogether in April 1951.⁴⁴ Curiously – and this might be thought important – Bevan’s resignation letter made no mention of rearmament or foreign policy. Having taken his bat and ball home, at a PLP meeting he then launched into a tirade that Dalton likened to Oswald Mosley and ‘seemed to be on the edge of a nervous breakdown’.⁴⁵ The civil war that was to rack the Labour Party until Attlee retired and Gaitskell replaced him in December 1955 had begun.

The crisis could probably have been avoided: the argument centred on only £23 million of NHS spending; Attlee was away ill at a crucial time and did not exert himself to find a compromise; and experience soon showed that Gaitskell had got his budget sums wrong (the Churchill government later scaling down rearmament spending). Yet while the long-term consequences were momentous, and the feuding within Cabinet hardly helped even in the short-term, it must also be questioned as to how far the Bevan-Gaitskell rivalry contributed to the collapse of the government. Party meetings thereafter were spiteful and bad-tempered, but the public conflict only renewed itself after the 1951 general election, when Labour was back in Opposition. The contest was unquestionably vicious, but was not played out on the public stage while Labour was in government.

The Conservatives and the propaganda battle

For their part the Conservatives did not stand still after their crushing defeat in 1945. Far from it: the party worked hard to recover its hold on the political situation and, in a series of presentational shifts (usually masterminded by Rab Butler) was able to gradually reconnect with important strands of public opinion. To be sure, this was slow going; the recovery was only partially complete by the time of the 1951 general election – Labour performed strongly even in going down to defeat – but it was just enough to nudge the Conservatives over the finishing line just ahead of their opponents. Labour's defeat can thus only be understood in the context of the wider party-political competition. The Conservative leaders quickly discerned in Attlee's Britain the opportunity to reframe the battle for public support and polarise it around wholly new issues. The factor enabling this polarisation was that of living standards.

Living standards – encompassing issues including austerity, consumption, and rationing – were high on the political agenda throughout the entire life of the Attlee government. The crisis of consumption and living standards began less than a year after the 1945 election. In February 1946, dried egg (a dietary staple) was withdrawn from rations in order to reduce dollar imports. This decision resulted in a public outcry. Press coverage focused on the problems this posed for the housewife with emotive headlines such as 'Families almost under-nourished' and 'Britain's women unite in revolt against foot cuts'.⁴⁶ In July 1946, this situation became one of real toxicity when bread rationing was introduced for the first time (something avoided even during the war). There were large scale media campaigns against the measure. In

the autumn of 1947, this was followed by fresh import cuts, resulting in reduced rations. In the November 1947 local elections, there was a clear swing towards the Conservatives; the Attlee government had been warned that the public was unwilling to tolerate deprivation. And though shortages became less pressing from 1948 onwards, rising prices became a similarly pressing problem in everyday life. Living standards thus remained fixed high atop the political agenda. Though this was – until relatively recently – neglected by historians keen to focus on nationalisation and other aspects of socialist policy,⁴⁷ the reality is that the quality of everyday life was of far greater concern to the public than party dogmas or pet projects. And living standards were squeezed very hard indeed in post-war Britain as austerity took hold. As a result the Conservative Party calculated that popular dissatisfaction with living standards could be turned into the site of a major – and profitable – propaganda battle with the Attlee government. It is impossible to grasp the fall of the Labour ministry apart from the efforts of the Conservative Party to fracture its electoral base and dislodge it from power.

But the first, and necessary, task was to ensure that the Conservatives could actually win a hearing from the public. The party had borne the blame for the 1930s and the war, and – as if that was not bad enough – in the 1945 election the Conservatives appeared unresponsive to the unfocused, temporary, but powerful desire for a new beginning. Improving the party's image by bringing its appeal up to date was crucial. Of course, the Conservative Party has frequently proven flexible in adapting to changing political, social, and economic conditions, and the years following 1945 saw the party prove to be rather fleet of foot.

Much of this, of course, can be attributed to the fact that in doctrinal terms the ascendant Conservative leadership were by no means inimical to a policy based on

welfarism and a mixed economy. In 1945, Churchill was unfairly caricatured as an enemy of such policies, and it remains a popular image almost seventy years on. But it is bogus. Despite the hysteria over his resistance to parts of the Beveridge report, Churchill had accepted sixteen of its twenty-three recommendations and gave a broader commitment to what he called ‘Beveridge-type’ reforms. And men like Butler (architect of the 1944 Education Act), Anthony Eden, and Harold Macmillan (author of *The Third Way* in 1938) similarly understood that in order to successfully compete political parties now had to promise certain things. The Conservatives were simply reclaiming ground that Attlee had elbowed them off six years earlier. More to the point, the reality is that no political party has done more to advance collectivism in Britain than the Conservative Party, no matter how much its activists and opponents alike bemoan that fact.⁴⁸ Therefore the presentational shift after 1945 was hardly a wrenching one; it was wholly traditional (and perhaps predicable) that, in the 1947 Industrial Charter, the party explicitly committed itself to ‘central direction of the economy’ and a policy of full employment.⁴⁹ That was, after all, where the votes were.

Butler was the main driving force in this bid to remake the Conservative Party’s public image. ‘Power is the first goal of party politics, the sine qua non of political effectiveness’ he recalled when describing the reorientation of the party.⁵⁰ As chairman of the Conservative Research Department from 1945 to 1964, and as chairman of the Advisory Committee on Policy and Political Education, Butler sought to ensure that his party caught up with Labour. He worked alongside figures like Oliver Lyttelton, Iain Macleod, Harold Macmillan, David Maxwell Fyfe, Enoch Powell, and Oliver Stanley – a formidable combination of political minds. In 1945 Labour had polemically depicted the Conservatives as the traditional enemies of

social reform; but, as it was difficult to substantiate this charge when set against the record of the party, it is unsurprising that Butler's first priority was to combat it. What was true was that public language in Britain had changed because of the war, and in 1945 the Conservatives struggled to react to this as skilfully as the Labour party. This was another problem that Butler worked to remedy. He therefore set about bringing the party's 'modes of expression' up to date'.⁵¹ Butler felt that the 'propaganda victory' had gone to Labour months before the election due to the endless pamphlets rolled out by Herbert Morrison, and he thus patterned his own efforts on those of the wartime Home Secretary.⁵²

As the brains behind the Industrial Charter, Butler pledged in a speech in March 1946 that 'modern Conservatism' necessitated 'strong central guidance over the operation of the economy'.⁵³ The Charter has been described as 'the most important post-war policy document produced by the Conservatives', because while substantively it was largely a continuation of the economic thinking of the 1930s National governments, nevertheless it was strikingly modern in tone.⁵⁴ In the pamphlet *Fundamental Issues*, Butler declared that due to the complexity of modern economic life, 'the state will have to be the grand arbiter between competing interests'.⁵⁵ Elsewhere, Butler argued that government was needed to 'redress injustice' and he endorsed 'planning' to that end on behalf of the party.⁵⁶ He and Macmillan said that 'A good Tory in history has never been afraid of the use of the state', and that 'Toryism has always been a form of paternal socialism'.⁵⁷ In the *Industrial Charter*, *The Agricultural Charter*, *Right Road for Britain*, and *10 Points of Conservative Policy* the party combined its anti-collectivist pledges with broad support for Attlee's welfare state. While some Conservatives inevitably thought this all very 'pink', the approach was in the ascendancy from 1946 onwards.⁵⁸ Butler

described the party's position as halfway 'between Manchester and Moscow'.⁵⁹ The purpose was to give the public 'positive' reasons for voting Conservative (like a pledge to greatly expand the construction of houses – Britain still being a million units short by 1950), and to ensure that the party spoke a comparable language to its enemy. In this, Butler succeeded; and the outcome was, as John Charmley puts it, a New Model Toryism.⁶⁰ By the 1950 general election, the Conservative Party appeared up-to-date once again.

But, as suggested above, the reason that all of this struck a chord with the public was that there existed widespread discontent with everyday life. Propaganda will only find purchase where it connects to actual experience. In the case of post-war Britain, there existed ample raw material to mine. There was no return to normality and, unsurprisingly, the Labour government got much of the blame. There were successive economic crises, living standards continued to be squeezed long after the guns fell silent, consumer products of all kinds were subject to rationing and control (sometimes more stringent than during the war itself), shortages were prevalent, and there was relative deprivation throughout the country. Life was drab and austere. This was not what *Let Us Face the Future* had promised; the public having been seduced by the idea of a New Jerusalem, the reality was a disappointment.

What the Conservative Party did was to couple its new policy of vocal commitment to welfarism to another, dual, strategy: exploitation of this disillusionment. Specifically, the Conservatives recognised an opportunity to win back key voter groups who had partially abandoned them in 1945. Under Butler's guidance, the party thus forged a new coalition of voters based on the issue of living standards. And the middle classes were central to this.

Middle class living standards had fallen significantly under the Attlee government. The staples of their lifestyle – ample food and clothes, access to consumer products, entertainment, luxuries like motor cars, travel, and perhaps domestic service – were all squeezed very considerably. Middle class protein and calorie intake was reduced sharply during the war and failed to recover thereafter. The middle classes were buffeted by the simultaneous gales of rising prices, high taxation, labour shortages, rationing and controls. Savings were eroded and their lives disrupted in significant ways. It is true that the working classes were also hit by shortages, but in general terms this was offset by full employment. The middle classes suffered disproportionately in Attlee's Britain. In early 1950, Gaitskell confided to his diary that the people in the middle felt they had 'suffered considerable economic disadvantage by our actions'.⁶¹ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska labels this phenomena 'the plight of the middle classes', and it was perhaps natural that Labour's inroads into middle class areas in the South of England and around London in particular – made in 1945 and crucial to the outcome of that election – were left vulnerable.⁶²

The public frequently struggled to understand why there were continued shortages years after the end of the war. While they had been willing to make sacrifices for the war effort, there was bafflement as to why such measures were necessary once the war was over. The people did not share Labour's ardour for the socialist project – indeed, as Steven Fielding has argued, had probably never shared it – and proved to be far more interested in the food in their belly.⁶³ Food shortages were always high on the political agenda in the late 1940s. Britons were an increasingly hedonistic lot, and that did not align with the problems and priorities of the Attlee government. Rationing and controls had an immediate impact on everyday life; there were more than 25,000 controls in all,⁶⁴ and opinion polls regularly showed

that rationing was the key domestic issue in the minds of the voters.⁶⁵ People wanted to consume things again, as they had in the 1930s. Harold Wilson's 'bonfire of controls' was a political response to the fact that, by late 1948, criticism of the government on the issue was at fever pitch. Doing what any sensible opposition does, the Conservative Party aligned itself with this public mood. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska has identified party politics from the late forties onwards as coming to represent nothing less than a 'battle over consumption', in which living standards became the key issue and Labour's evident failure to deliver the goods could be contrasted with a positive Conservative appeal to do better.⁶⁶

But the middle classes were not the only targets. Much of the burden of managing households under the difficult conditions of the post-war years fell on women specifically. Wives were usually in charge of the domestic sphere, after all. It is therefore no surprise that women were more antagonised by the Labour government than men. In its propaganda, the Conservative Party therefore sought to align itself with this female discontent.⁶⁷ A pamphlet, *A True Balance*, was aimed at female voters, as was a short magazine, *Home Truths*. This found traction in a social context of inadequate access to even basic essentials like eggs, fat, meat, and bread; and in early 1951, the meat ration was reduced to its lowest ever level – six years after the end of the war. In 1952, an internal Labour report found that the 1951 election was lost 'in the queue at the butcher's or the grocer's'.⁶⁸ Indeed the election saw a large swing to the Conservatives among women. This was crucial in determining the outcome.

Life in Attlee's Britain was frequently felt to be 'illiberal and restrictive of personal choice'.⁶⁹ This was, after all, the era of Douglas Jay's boast that 'the gentleman in Whitehall really does know better what is good for people than the

people know themselves’ – a statement that seemed to sum up Labour’s lack of empathy.⁷⁰ Gallup found that on every domestic issue bar employment the Conservatives were viewed more positively than Labour. That had electoral consequences. As Morgan comments, austerity ‘had taken hold of the public consciousness like a malignant disease’.⁷¹ The Conservatives depicted the problems of post-war Britain as being an inevitable product of socialist mismanagement of the economy rather than – as Labour maintained⁷² – simply a consequence of the war. One Conservative slogan offered a sardonic invitation to ‘shiver with Shinwell and starve with Strachey’ in reference to a shortage of fish and coal.⁷³ This was one example of many wherein the Conservative party utilised the rhetoric of austerity to both reinforce and profit from the public’s misgivings about Labour. Butler combined Conservative promises on welfare with pledges to dismantle restrictions on consumer products, get rid of controls, and permit people to run their own lives again. They waged this battle in the 1950, 1951, and 1955 elections. The Conservatives thus developed and propagated ‘an aggressive redefinition of socialism’ – based on ‘bureaucracy, red tape, taxation and, above all, a vindictive austerity’.⁷⁴ It is striking that in 10 Points of Conservative Policy, the number one pledge was ‘individual freedom’.⁷⁵ That demonstrates the public mood that the Conservatives sought to tap into. It was potentially a rich resource – and so it proved. The political system became highly polarised and – if the turnout of 84 per cent in 1950 and 82.5 per cent in 1951, the highest ever recorded in the age of mass democracy, is any indication – the public were similarly polarised.

So effective in this was the party that David Willets and Zweiniger-Bargielowska have both depicted it as the architect of its own return to power, the decisive winner of the propaganda battle with the government.⁷⁶ As Ross McKibbin

puts it, the Conservatives were able to fight on two slogans: ‘the welfare state is safe in our hands and we will set the people free’.⁷⁷ It must be acknowledged that the Conservative Party did not actually win a by-election seat between 1945 and 1951. Butler pointed out that ‘despite the inexorable rise in the cost of living, increasing burdens of direct and indirect taxation, intensification of physical controls, restrictions and rationing ... and above all the series of recurring economic and financial crises ... the government’s stock in the country remained obstinately high.’⁷⁸ That said, there were clear swings towards the party at by-elections.⁷⁹ Moreover, the Conservative did well in local elections.⁸⁰ Labour lost control of major cities including Birmingham, Glasgow, Manchester, and Newcastle. As noted earlier, the Conservative Party’s recovery was incomplete in 1951 (Butler and Lord Woolton, the party chairman, had long been at odds over propaganda)⁸¹ and significant sections of the public continued to stick by Labour but, given that the general election was such a close-run thing, the Conservative strategy of exploiting popular disaffection was almost certainly central to Labour’s defeat. It seems that the new Conservative coalition of voters was just broad enough to deliver Churchill the keys to Downing Street.

Running out of money?

But to comprehend the problem fully we also need to situate popular discontent alongside the economic strategies chosen by the Attlee government. This serves another purpose. There is, after all, a common view that (as Margaret Thatcher once put it) Labour governments ‘end’ by running out of money. And the Attlee government’s economic policies were closely, if indirectly, connected to its decline.

The cost of the Second World War was colossal, depriving Britain of around a quarter of her wealth. In focusing on armaments production, the Churchill coalition had been compelled to give up much of Britain's export sector; but as the country still required imports, a huge balance of payments crisis loomed at the end of the war. The country had also been dependent on the Lend-Lease policy with the United States. Thus, when Lend-Lease was suddenly terminated following the Japanese surrender in August 1945, Britain was fatally exposed. John Maynard Keynes led a delegation to Washington and, in December, negotiated a loan of \$3.75 billion – yet the terms of the loan included a commitment to make sterling fully convertible by mid-1947. In August 1945, and foreseeing a 'financial Dunkirk', Keynes had argued that Britain would require an unrelenting focus on restoring exports and drastic reductions in overseas expenditure on imports in order to resolve the crisis.⁸² The only alternative to restoration of exports would have been even greater reductions in imports – but as that would have squeezed living standards still further, it was ruled out. This would have been a dire situation whatever happened, demanding considerable political dexterity. But the problem was the Attlee government ducked several hard decisions.

The American loan of 1945 was spent on driving forward the New Jerusalem that Labour had pledged to build, rather than on restoring trade – the lifeblood of the British economy – and rejuvenating industry. The same was true of the Marshall Aid that arrived from 1948 onwards.⁸³ Britain received \$2.7 billion from the United States in Marshall Aid but, unlike West Germany (which only received \$1.7 billion), did not make the modernisation of British industry its focus. The money was directed at paying for welfare programmes and imports (to mollify consumers disaffected with rationing) instead of generating the export industries that would pay for such imports and programmes efficiently. Of course, it was politically impossible for Labour to

retreat; but the result was that New Jerusalem was wholly dependent on American handouts. Arguably, what was needed was mass capital investment to replace destroyed or obsolete plant and infrastructure; a huge expansion of technical and vocational education; and focus on technology such as machine tools and ball bearings (both of which underpinned industrial performance, but British versions were substandard and higher quality equipment had to be imported). West Germany and Japan managed it, but Britain famously shied away. The Attlee government resisted building motorways, failed to modernise the railway network or telecommunications, and did not energetically rebuild the ports destroyed by the Luftwaffe. Electricity-generating capacity was also neglected. This strategy (or, more accurately, these choices) meant that the investment policies of the government impeded industry and economic recovery.

Pointing this out is not to underrate the formidable difficulties faced by the Attlee government. But the reality is that Labour failed to take the decisions necessary to restore prosperity and trade. The contrast with the West German approach, particularly, is palpable. The Attlee government – displaying an instinctive faith in state planning as a means to achieve prosperity – did not address the long-standing weaknesses in the British economy that stood in the way of a restoration of national solvency. In focusing on welfare projects that Britain was reliant on other governments to finance via aid, Labour fudged critical choices about the structure of post-war Britain. Correlli Barnett has offered the most famous indictment of that, but Kenneth Morgan also pointedly noted that Labour’s policy was ‘more a matter of exhortation’ than genuine planning.⁸⁴ It was not helped by the fact that responsibility was diffused between the Lord President (tasked with domestic economic co-ordination), the Chancellor (charged with fiscal policy), and the President of the

Board of Trade (focused on the export drive).⁸⁵ This was, in essence, planning without the plan.

The political relevance of all of this is two-fold. First, the convertibility crisis of 1947 was such a hammer blow to the credibility of the government that it compounded Labour's lack of new ideas and contributed to the government's exhaustion. Secondly, the reality was that by 1950-51, the Labour government had failed to get the country economically back on its feet. In an environment of austerity and relative deprivation, that record was simply not good enough in the eyes of much of the public. Widespread controls, unpopular as they were, had been accepted on a promise that 'planning' would equate with prosperity, but by the end of the 1940s Britain was succumbing to the same declinism that had so marked the interwar era – and that would one day be christened the 'British disease'.

The Liberals: the decisive factor?

A final force at work in Labour's ejection from office was the Liberal Party. Attlee later recalled that, even before the 1951 election, he was sure that the outcome would turn 'on the way Liberal electors cast their vote'.⁸⁶ Whereas in 1950 the Liberals put up 475 candidates, in 1951 they could only manage 109. Even in 1950 they captured only nine seats (this fell to six in 1951) but the point is that the Liberals still won a sizeable number of votes: 2.6 million in 1950 (9.1 per cent). With the Liberals unable to field so many candidates in 1951 their vote collapsed to just 730,000 (2.6 per cent).

Most constituencies lacked a Liberal candidate and that made the question of how Liberal supporters would cast their vote a matter of great significance. The

evidence indicates that this made a crucial difference to the outcome of the election. Backing for the Conservatives increased to 13.7 million in 1951, up from 12.5 million the year before. In terms of share of the vote, that translated into an increase from 43.5 per cent to 48 per cent. The Conservatives were highly energetic in cultivating the Liberal voter: a 1949 market research study commissioned by the party concluded that the typical Liberal supporter was near-identical to the classic ‘floating voter’, and the Conservatives set about trying to win their support.⁸⁷ Large-scale press advertising was supplemented by direct mailing of millions of leaflets (stressing that the Conservative party was the spiritual home for supporters of Gladstone and Lloyd George) to likely Liberal voters, and Conservative activists targeted them for doorstep work.⁸⁸ The Conservatives exploited the issue of austerity and the collapse of the Liberals to capture middle-class floating voters, attract those who previously supported the Liberals, and thus win back seats in suburban areas. While Labour secured large majority in its heartlands, the Conservatives won smaller – but ultimately sufficient – majorities elsewhere. It was a strategy that worked well.

Given how robust Labour’s own vote proved, for all the Conservatives’ efforts, the collapse of the Liberals was perhaps the decisive factor in forcing Attlee from office. Labour’s poll increased by 700,000 votes in 1951, and its share of the vote grew from 46.1 per cent to 48.8 per cent.⁸⁹ Morgan argued that ‘had it not been for the much reduced tally of Liberal candidates, Churchill would not have won at all. By a six-to-four proportion, Liberals voted Conservative in seats where there was no Liberal candidate’.⁹⁰ In important respects Labour did not ‘lose’ the election: outperforming their opponents by 230,000 votes in all, it was surely only the lack of Liberal candidates that enabled the Conservatives to win in sufficient constituencies. The Liberal swing to the Conservatives, not a falling away of Labour’s own support,

may have been the key to a result in 1951 that has been described as a ‘psephological anomaly’.⁹¹

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- ³ Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism*, pp. 298-302, 304-5.
- ⁴ Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism*, pp. 301-2.
- ⁵ Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism*, p. 302.
- ⁶ Perry Anderson, ‘Origins of the Present Crisis’, in Anderson, *English Questions* (London, 1992), pp. 15-47, at 43.
- ⁷ Perry Anderson, ‘The Figures of Descent’, in Anderson, *English Question*, pp. 121-92, at 165, 69.
- ⁸ David Coates, *The Labour Party and the Struggle for Socialism* (London, 1975).
- ⁹ Philip M. Williams (ed), *The Diary of Hugh Gaitskell 1945-1956* (London, 1983), p.167; Dalton Diary, 27 February 1950; Foot, Bevan, p. 247. For Bevan, see *The Times*, 5 July 1948.
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- ¹¹ John Charmley, *A History of Conservative Politics since 1830* (Basingstoke, 2008), p. 158.
- ¹² Pimlott (ed), *The Political Diary of Hugh Dalton, 1918-40, 1945-60*, p.471.
- ¹³ Williams (ed), *The Diary of Hugh Gaitskell*, pp.167-8.
- ¹⁴ Morgan, *Labour in Power 1945-51*, p.412.
- ¹⁵ Kevin Jefferys, *The Labour Party Since 1945*, p.25.
- ¹⁶ Edmund Dell, *A Strange Eventful History: Democratic Socialism in Britain* (London, 1999), p.206.
- ¹⁷ H. G. Nicholas, *The British General Election of 1950* (London, 1951), pp. 329-33, and David Butler, *The British General Election of 1951* (London, 1952), p. 243.
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- ²⁰ Philip M. Williams, *Hugh Gaitskell* (paperback edn, Oxford, 1982), p.151; Ross McKibben, *Parties and People: England 1914-1951* (Oxford, 2010), pp.171-2.
- ²¹ Morgan, *Labour in Power 1945-1951*, p.351.
- ²² Peter Hennessey, *The Prime Minister: the office and its holders since 1945* (London, 2000), p. 160.
- ²³ Dell, *A Strange Eventful History*, p.209.
- ²⁴ David Marquand, *Britain Since 1918: The Strange Career of British Democracy* (London, 2008), p.146.
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- ²⁶ Williams (ed), *The Diary of Hugh Gaitskell*, pp.151-4.
- ²⁷ Donoghue and Jones, *Herbert Morrison*, pp.448-9.
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- ²⁹ Richard Crossman, ‘The Lessons of 1945’, *New Statesman*, 19 April 1963.
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- ³³ Morgan, *Labour in Power*, p.73.
- ³⁴ Schneer, *Labour’s Conscience: The Labour Left 1945-51* (London, 1988).
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- ³⁷ Morgan, *Ages of Reform*, pp.218-19.
- ³⁸ CAB 128/18, CM (50) 52, 1 August 1950; CAB 128/18, CM (50) 87, 29 November 1950.

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- ⁴¹ Kenneth Morgan, *Labour in Power* (Oxford, 1984), p. 443.
- ⁴² CAB 128/19, CM (51) 8, 25 January 1951; CAB 128/19, CM (51) 9, 26 January 1951; Gaitskell Diary, 2 February 1951, pp.229-33.
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- ⁴⁴ The Times, 4 April 1951; Dalton Diary, 9 April 1951, pp. 521-2; CAB 128/19, CM (51) 26, 9 April 1951.
- ⁴⁵ Dalton Diary, 24 April 1951, pp. 538-9.
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- ⁵⁵ R.A. Butler, *Fundamental Issues* (CPC no. 3837, London, 1946), p. 7.
- ⁵⁶ R.A. Butler, *About the Industrial Charter* (CPC no. 17, London, 1947), pp. 4-6.
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- ⁵⁹ Charmley, *A History of Conservative Politics*, p. 156.
- ⁶⁰ Charmley, *A History of Conservative Politics*, Chapter Ten.
- ⁶¹ Gaitskell diary, 21 March 1950, p. 167.
- ⁶² Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Rationing, Austerity and the Conservative Party recovery after 1945', *Historical Journal* (1994), pp. 173-97 at 180.
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- ⁶⁵ For instance, see G. H. Gallup, *The Gallup International Public Opinion Polls: Great Britain, 1937-1975*, volume one (New York, 1976), pp. 135, 148, 160, 165.
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- ⁷¹ Morgan, *People's Peace*, p. 76.
- ⁷² *ABC of the Crisis* (Labour Party, 1947).
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- ⁷⁵ *10 Points of Conservative Policy*.
- ⁷⁶ Willets, 'The New Conservatism?'; Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Rationing, Austerity and the Conservative Party recovery', and her *Austerity in Britain*.
- ⁷⁷ McKibbin, *Parties and People*, p. 167.
- ⁷⁸ Butler, *The Art of the Possible*, p. 132.
- ⁷⁹ Zweiniger-Bargielowska 'Rationing, Austerity and the Conservative Party recovery', p.183.
- ⁸⁰ See Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Rationing, Austerity and the Conservative Party recovery', pp. 183-5.
- ⁸¹ Butler, *The Art of the Possible*, pp. 151-2.
- ⁸² CAB 129/1, CP (45) 112, Memorandum by Keynes on 'Our Overseas Financial Prospects', 14 August 1945.

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- ⁸³ The story being best told by Correlli Barnett: see *The Audit of War* (London, 1986) and *The Lost Victory* (London, 1995).
- ⁸⁴ Kenneth O. Morgan, *Britain since 1945: The People's Peace* (Oxford, third edition, 2001), p. 67.
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