

THE BRITISH GENERAL ELECTION 1945

BY

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1945

A Research Paper

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Master of Arts

by

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a research paper written by Howard R. Bradley entitled "The British General Election 1945." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in History.

Thomas P. Dixon
Major Professor

Accepted for the Graduate Council:

William H. Ellis
Dean of the Graduate School

Great Britain, on the eve of the General Election of 1945, was in a unique position. Since the success of the joint Anglo-American invasion of Normandy in June, 1944, it was becoming obvious that victory over Nazi Germany was assured. However, it still remained to be seen how long the struggle would drag on, and how many additional lives would have to be sacrificed.

Since the beginning of the war, the English had been threatened by German invasion. Invasion seemed less likely in 1945 than when France fell in June, 1940. The blitz and the Battle of Britain in September, October, and November, 1940, brought the war closer to England than any war in history.

The year 1945 saw death and destruction in southeastern England as a result of the V-1 and V-2 bombs. Though the war was winding down, and actually came to an end in Europe before election day (July 5), life in Britain was austere and remained so for the next five years. Most cuts of meat were rationed by the Government, as well as petrol, liquor, tobacco, coal, leather, and various food stuffs. On days when rationed items were available, long lines of people would queue up to wait their chance for a roast for Sunday dinner, or a bottle of port wine.¹

¹Arthur Marwick, The Home Front, Thomas & Hudson, London, 1976, p. 16.

The people who owned automobiles stored their car so that petrol supplies could be used in the war effort. A shortage of news-print forced people to depend on radio broadcasts for most of their news information and entertainment.² In some areas these shortages were painfully acute. In Yorkshire, an electrical shortage created by the coal rationing program produced a blackout in the winter of 1944-45.³

Fortunately, inflation was not a major problem. However, the average Briton had little money to spend, and the supply of durable goods was limited due to the war. The Government tried to make the best of this difficult situation. They succeeded in convincing the British people that their sacrifices were in the national interest. However, this theme grew weary before restrictions and rationing ended in 1951.

In loss of life, the Second World War was not as severe as World War I. However, with the advent of the airplane and the relative strength of the enemy, the war seemed much closer in 1945. In the second war, no man, woman, or child was immune to or isolated from the destruction. Although Kent, Surrey, and the southeastern counties suffered more than their share of the crisis, no area was left unaffected from Cornwall to Dover, from Southampton to the Hebrides.

²Norman Longmate, How We Lived Then, Hutchison Publisher, London, 1971, p. 147.

³Ibid, p. 130.

More than any conflict in English history, the British people were united in fighting for a cause. The cause was just, great, and unquestionable. "No other nation had fought completely through two world wars as Great Britain had done by 1945."⁴ The empire was inevitably to decline, and living standards at home to improve. However, through the conflict, "England had risen just the same."⁵ These sacrifices seem even more incredible because of the fact that Britain stood alone in 1940, after the fall of France. Few individuals would have given the English more than six months before the Germans would overwhelm them. There were even voices calling for a negotiated settlement. Anyone who suggested such a thing knew nothing of British tenacity, will, and Sir Winston Churchill. The desire to carry on the war was almost unanimous among the British people.⁶ As Churchill appropriately put it, "The British people lived with hardship their garment." The social events of the war years helps one to unravel the mysteries of the 1945 election. England had endured immeasurable hardship and suffering. When Britons cast their votes on July 5, those hardships proved to be a significant factor.

⁴A. J. P. Taylor, English History 1914-45, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1965, p. 600.

⁵Ibid, p. 601.

⁶Ibid, p. 577.

Of course, a look at any election requires an analysis of the parties. This is a difficult task when looking at Britain in the mid-twentieth century. While most men in Churchill's cabinet were Conservatives, they were called Nationals. This was due to the fact that in actuality a coalition government existed from the time of the fall of Neville Chamberlain until the King dismissed Parliament in May, 1945, and a caretaker government was established. Also, the term National was used by the Conservatives in 1945 to give the old party a new image for the election. Hopefully, this change would make the Government more attractive to the industrial areas which normally voted against the Torys. In fact, it is hard to find the Conservative Party in 1945. Very few of the ministers who came to power with Stanley Baldwin in 1935 or Chamberlain in 1937 were still in important positions by 1945. This was due to the dramatic changes which occurred when Chamberlain resigned in May, 1940, and the subsequent changes in 1941 and 1942, which generally allowed more Labour Party representation in the Government.⁷

For the Conservatives, party organization on the local level was almost nonexistent.⁸ By 1945, a decade had elapsed since the party had fought a major election. It is the nature of political parties

⁷Harold Nicholson, The War Years 1939-1945, Putney, New York, 1967, p. 144.

⁸Lindsay & Harrington, The Conservative Party 1918-70, St. Martin, New York, 1974, p. 366.

that when they are successful and comfortable, very little work is done. Even work to keep the party machinery well oiled is lacking. It also seems obvious that there were many more Conservatives in Britain in 1935 than 1945. Stanley Baldwin never achieved anything like the fame and admiration that Churchill enjoyed at the end of the European War, yet Baldwin won in 1935 while Churchill headed a badly defeated party in 1945.

While the war was largely fought and won by 1945, the lessons of the previous ten years had not been wasted on the electors. Obviously, the voters blamed the Conservatives more than any other party for Britain's lack of readiness in 1939. In the crucial year leading up to September 1, 1939, successive British governments had not acted from strength, but from timidity and weakness. The appeasement at Munich by Chamberlain in 1938 was the last straw. However, it should be remembered that the Labour Party overwhelmingly favored disarmament all through the 1930's. The paths followed by Baldwin and Chamberlain were not dissimilar from those followed by Labour's first Prime Minister, Ramsey MacDonald.

Although the Conservatives were technically in power in 1945, it was a party divided against itself. Churchill was leader, but he was never comfortable in that role, nor was much of the party totally comfortable with him as their head. A number of back-benchers during the war had been ministers under Baldwin and Chamberlain. Churchill's

rise had meant their equally rapid demise as a political force. Also, Churchill had never been regarded as a good party man. He had begun his political career as a Liberal and had served in the Liberal Party ministry of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman from 1906 to 1908. He also had served in the Admiralty during World War I under Herbert Asquith and Lloyd George before the Gallipoli disaster in 1915. Churchill had publicly bolted party discipline when he spoke with great fervor about the dangers of disarmament. On this count, Churchill was obviously correct and his party in error, yet there was resentment. In fact, throughout the 1930's when Churchill was out of the government, he was almost a comic right-wing figure in the liberal press. He only remained in the public eye through his bold oratory and statements in the press, usually a press controlled by his friend Lord Beaverbrook.⁹

Churchill, as party leader, was faced with a two-edged sword. As leader of the Tory Party, he was forced to stand on the record of two successive governments in which he had no part. Therefore, in the election of 1945, Churchill found himself as Champion of a party over which he had little control. Though Churchill was bitterly opposed to the appeasement of Nazi Germany, his party under Chamberlain had carried the policy to the ultimate conclusion at Munich. In essence,

⁹Henry Pelling, Winston Churchill, Macmillan, London, 1974, p. 417.

"...it was the record of the last twenty years that was at stake."¹⁰

To the Labour Party, governing was an almost forgotten experience. Only for a brief period under Ramsey MacDonald had Labour been able to form a government. The Labour Party's slow rise to the role of "opposition party" was in direct relationship to the decline of the Liberal Party, which never recovered from the Great War. Also, the strength of the Labour Party was closely tied to the rise of the Trade Union movement. As industrial Britain grew, so grew the constituency to which the Labour Party would appeal. Though the party had grown rapidly since its beginnings, factions continued to divide it. The Labour Party was a strange mixture of people and classes. The greatest party advocates were the university intellectuals, going back to the Fabians of the late nineteenth century and the unionized workers of the Midlands. In addition, the philosophies of the Labour Party varied widely. The party encompassed those right in the political spectrum who were almost unrecognizable from some Progressive Torys. On the other end of the party, there were those that were pro-Communists, or at least pro-Soviet Union.

Clement Attlee took over the leadership of the Labour Party in the mid-1930's with the passing of Ramsey MacDonald and Arthur Henderson. In 1940, Attlee became Deputy Prime Minister, a position

¹⁰ McCallum and Readman, British General Elections, Oxford University Press, London, 1947, p. 44.

created by Churchill for political coalition purposes. Both Churchill and Attlee must be given credit for the success of the War Cabinet. Both men had great respect for each other, although many harsh remarks were made in the campaign.

In many ways, Clement Attlee had been a founder of the Labour Party. Attlee was trained in economics and later taught the subject at the University of London. However, his roots were middle class and strongly influenced by the events of World War I.¹¹

Clement Attlee had been responsible for Churchill's coming to power in 1940 when he refused to join a government headed by Neville Chamberlain. After talking with Brenden Bracken, Attlee agreed to join a Churchill Government, although they differed on many domestic issues. Attlee, like so many Britons, saw in Churchill those qualities so badly needed to face the dictators.¹² There was widespread distrust among Labour "back-benchers" toward Churchill, but in May, 1940, Britain was a desperate nation, ready to take desperate action.

By 1945, the days of the Third Reich were numbered. Both Conservatives and Labourites began to plan for the electoral contest that would come once the war was over. Attlee remained uncommitted

¹¹Harold Wilson, A Prime Minister on Prime Ministers, Summit Books, New York, 1977, p. 284.

¹²Ibid, p. 290.

on Labour's plans for the coming election. He was in a difficult political situation, and realized that the war coalition could last only as long as the fighting. He was reluctant to fight an election on the heels of an Allied victory, for he would be running against Churchill, a man who had become a legend during the past five years.

The wartime coalition had created a situation unique in English history. As Deputy Prime Minister, Attlee was privy to information of which no other man, except the Prime Minister, had knowledge. Attlee was directly involved in the Big Three conference at Tehran in 1943 with Churchill, Stalin, and Roosevelt. He attended the Potsdam Conference while the votes were being counted back in England. So when the call came from King George VI on July 26, Attlee was probably better prepared for the awesome duties of being the King's First Minister than any man had been before or has been since.¹³

When Germany finally capitulated on May 8, 1945, one week after Hitler's suicide, the long and terrible conflict in Europe was over. Churchill had hoped to delay an election until the war in Asia was completed. Although most officials believed that Japan could not be defeated before 1946, Churchill was aware of the Manhattan Project and was probably aware that the war would not last as long as many feared.

¹³Carl F. Brand, The British Labour Party, Cambridge, London, 1969, p. 237.

Many expected a joint Anglo-American invasion of Japan. However, the events of August 6 and August 9, 1945 changed those expectations, as well as the course of human history.

After consultation with the King, Churchill formed a caretaker government that ran from May to July 26. At this point the election began in earnest. The date of the voting was set for July 5, three weeks after the King had dissolved Parliament and the caretaker government had assumed power. Churchill hoped to keep the coalition alive until Japan was subdued and the war completed, but the fact remained that a decade had passed since the last general election in 1935. This was probably the fact that pushed Attlee's decision to halt the coalition, although he did not wish to face Churchill at what seemed to be the zenith of his popularity. It took neither party very long to put their cooperative spirit to the side and pick up their respective political banners. In early June, the nightly radio broadcasts began. In these broadcasts, both parties were given the opportunity to take their stands on the issues. The broadcasts were the major device used by politicians before television and after constituencies had become too large to be canvassed door to door. These broadcasts were provided by the British Broadcasting Corporation at no expense to the parties. This series of talks was begun by Churchill on June 4. The Prime Minister in his first broadcast was quick to pick up the banner of the Tory Party. He, however, appeared overly partisan. Perhaps this was an attempt

to take firm control of a party which by and large had never trusted or favored him. Churchill struck hard at a number of men who only days before had been in his ministry. He was criticized for referring to the Independent Labour Party as "Socialist Gestapos."¹⁴ Even the Conservative press that backed Churchill called his switch from national leader to party leader as "uncomfortably abrupt."¹⁵ The following night Attlee addressed the nation in his quiet, calm manner. He said, "What we heard last night was the voice of the Prime Minister, but the mind of Lord Beaverbrook."¹⁶ The implication was clear. Without making any charges, Attlee was identifying Churchill with the old pre-war Conservatives, the group that many Britons had long loathed. Attlee definitely won the first round of the "Talks", which is in itself an irony. No doubt Churchill was one of the great orators of the century. Attlee, always seemingly quiet and thoughtful, was the messenger with the voice to which Britons would listen now that the threat of European war had passed. Churchill, on his second broadcast on June 13, attempted to tone down his hyperbolic attacks on his former colleagues. He spoke about such things as National Health Insurance and Social Security for the elderly. Churchill also discussed the

¹⁴Henry Pelling, Winston Churchill, Macmillan, London, 1974, p. 552.

¹⁵The Times (London), June 5, 1945, p. 1.

¹⁶The Times (London), June 6, 1945, p. 1.

Beveridge Plan, a program of study in domestic social changes instituted in 1937. Both parties gave "lip service" to the plan that would make Britain a socialist nation. However, the method of achieving a better standard of living varied greatly between Torys and Labourites. The Torys were committed to seeing these changes come about at home, especially free medical care for all citizens, but not at once. Churchill maintained that the program could come into existence when the revenue to operate it became available at the end of the war. Attlee and Labour demanded immediate steps to implement these measures, which would "sizably improve the lot of the average man."¹⁷ Attlee compared Churchill's promise of "someday" with the promise made to returning servicemen at the close of the First World War. The nation "fit for heroes", a term so effectively used by Lloyd George in the election of 1918, turned to a bitter joke with the suffering of the 1920's and 1930's. On June 15, Churchill made his third radio broadcast and scored perhaps his only victory of the campaign. Professor Harold Laski, the chairman of the Extra-Parliamentary Labour Party, a committee of Labourites out of the House of Commons, had said that Attlee should not attend the Potsdam Conference set for July 1945. Churchill raised the question, "How could Attlee assume the role of Prime Minister when his position as party leader was so

¹⁷Carl F. Brand, The British Labour Party, Cambridge, London, 1969, p. 224.

precarious?" In the end, Attlee went to Potsdam, mainly as an observer.

Both Tory and Labour Parties were allowed ten broadcasts, the Liberal Party was allowed four, and the Communists were allowed one speech. In these broadcasts, neither party dealt effectively with the most important issues of the day. In fact, the strongest debate between Churchill and Attlee came not over nationalization or socialized medicine, but over the constitution of the Labour Party.¹⁸

Both major parties issued pamphlets discussing the issues they deemed significant. The different perspectives of the parties can be seen in their preambles. The Conservatives issued A Declaration of Policy to the Electors, written by Churchill. It was as much a personal message as a party platform. It begins:

Britain is still at war and must not turn aside from the vast further efforts still needed to bring Japan to the same end as Germany. Even when all foreign enemies are utterly defeated, that will not be the end of our task. It will be the beginning of our further opportunity--the opportunity which we snatched from the jaws of disaster in 1940 to save the world from tyranny and then to play our part in its wise and helpful guidance.¹⁹

The declaration went on to praise the wartime coalition, especially the Prime Minister, for the resolute actions in the dark days of the previous five years.

¹⁸Henry Pelling, Winston Churchill, Macmillan, London, 1974, p. 549.

¹⁹Ibid, p. 553.

The manifesto of the Labour Party was written by Herbert Morrison and mentioned no one by name. In this instance, the disdain that Morrison felt for Attlee came through. The Labour manifesto was called Let Us Face the Future. The title is ironic in a nation where so few of either party were gladdened by the prospects of tomorrow. The Labour Party at this point was especially reluctant to face the future, expecting electoral defeat in July. The statement begins:

Victory is assured for us and our allies in the European war. The war in the East goes the same way. The British Labour Party is firmly resolved that Japanese barbarism shall be defeated just as decisively as Nazi aggression and tyranny. The people will have won both struggles. . . They deserved and must be assured a happier future than faced so many of them after the last war.

Later in the campaign the Labour Party issued a leaflet called The Guilty Party accusing the Torys of "trying to gain a new lease on power by riding the prestige of a man who was rejected and distrusted by them before the war."

While the politicians continued to spar with members of the opposing party, neither group was speaking much about the number one issue in the minds of most Britons, that being the housing shortage. A Gallup Poll in March and again in June, 1945, showed that housing was the most pressing issue of the 1945 election.²⁰ Countless

²⁰W. S. Churchill, Triumph and Tragedy, Houghton-Mifflin Co., Cambridge, Mass., 1953, p. 94.

thousands had been bombed out during the blitz of 1940. Very little rebuilding was begun until after Germany had been defeated. The shortage was so severe in some parts of the country that several families were living in single-family dwellings.

From the wording of their manifesto, the Labour Party was more in tune with the thinking of the British people than the Conservatives were. The Torys were the party of empire and granduer. The people of 1945 were thinking in terms of how their lives at home would be altered by the events of the postwar world. Churchill, in spite of his "hawkish" statements before the war, had to stand as the symbol of the Conservative Party, which was in effect responsible for everything that had happened during the last twenty years.²¹

It was impossible to predict the outcome of the balloting by the reaction of the crowds to Churchill and Attlee. The Prime Minister traveled the length of the country and was received with enormous ovations in the industrial and coal mining areas, in which neither he or the Conservatives had done well before. The Prime Minister did encounter a few heckers, especially in London in his own district of Woolford. He took the obstacles in great stride, obviously enjoying himself as he retorted to the crowds. He campaigned throughout the nation like a returning hero after a victorious battle. Clement Attlee's

²¹Clement Attlee, As It Happened, Oxford Press, Oxford, 1955, p. 54.

campaign style was the complete antithesis of that of the Prime Minister. He traveled in his own automobile driven by his wife. The crowds that greeted him were polite and well behaved, but small in comparison to the thousands that greeted Churchill. This situation gave Churchill great encouragement. In fact, it gave him and most of the Torys a false sense of security. Inside his own district Churchill was not opposed by Labour or Liberal Parties but only by Alexander Hancock, a farmer, an Independent who advocated a one-day work week.²² Although Churchill won by a three to one margin--27,688 to 10,488, his opponent's vote was uncomfortably high. Obviously these votes had been cast as a protest against the Prime Minister.

The role of the press in this election as in any election is hard to measure. Traditionally the Conservative papers such as The Daily Express and The Daily Telegraph or those owned by Lord Beaverbrook were soundly behind the Torys. The Labour papers such as The Daily Mirror and The Daily Mail were strongly partisan towards the Socialist candidates, while the grandfather of the British press, The Times, took a rather aloof attitude toward the election. They reported as objectively as possible the events of the campaign but seemed a bit disappointed at both parties. They stated editorially:

²²Henry Pelling, Winston Churchill, Macmillan, London, 1974, p. 556.

"Though a General Election was inevitable, there was every reason to hope that, with a limited field of contention as between leaders who had only just ceased to be colleagues, and in the face of an unfinished war it could be conducted without recourse to the more emotional forms of electioneering. The hope has been disappointed."²³

The Prime Minister made his last radio broadcast on the evening of June 30. His parting shot was a vague suggestion that the Labour Party was somehow related to Nazi tyranny. In a similar broadcast, Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden predicted that a Conservative defeat would be a victory for Soviet, French, and Italian Communists. "A Labour victory would begin the slow erosion of British democracy."²⁴ On the following evening in a speech at Peckham, Mr. Attlee charged that "The broadcast by Churchill showed a badly rattled man... and that the comparison between the Nazi Party and the Labour Party was a vile suggestion."²⁵

As election day approached, both parties were riddled with anxiety. However, the Labourites were probably the most apprehensive. Even their outspoken optimist, Herbert Morrison, would predict only "a strong Labour vote." He went on to say that, "... The people are concerned about how the Torys will rule once the war is over."²⁶ This

²³The Times (London), July 2, 1945, p. 16.

²⁴The Times (London), July 2, 1945, p. 16.

²⁵Ibid, June 26, 1945, p. 1.

²⁶Ibid, July, 3, 1945, p. 3.

almost seems an admission of defeat before the votes were cast.

There had been public opinion polls conducted throughout the campaign. The Gallup Polls in March and May gave the Labour Party a victory by less than one percentage point.²⁷ However, neither party paid a great deal of attention to these surveys, which were far from scientific and even admitted an error of up to five percent. While the British press was not accurate in their predictions of the outcome, they were closer than their American counterparts. Like most Americans, the American press had a larger-than-life view of Winston Churchill. Newsweek Magazine reported that "The issue in the British General Election is Winston Churchill, war leader."²⁸ Time Magazine did appear to take a more objective view of the election, especially in covering the platform of the Labour Party.²⁹

Another reason the election results were so difficult to predict was that approximately ten million electors were voting for the first time. Also, some four million servicemen would be voting, many for the first time. Also, the size of the House of Commons had increased from 615 members in 1935 to 635 members in 1945, due to population

²⁷ McCallum and Readman, British General Elections, Oxford University Press, London, 1947, p. 47.

²⁸ Newsweek, June 4, 1945, p. 32.

²⁹ Time, Foreign News, "Fateful Election", June 4, 1945, p. 32.

growth in the urban areas. It should have appeared obvious that most of the new seats would tend to be Labour, since they were in urban areas.

Time Magazine reported:

"War torn Britons wanted social reforms and meant to have them. Would they go part of the way to socialization with the Conservatives, or would they go most of the way with Labor. The Torys with Churchill's war achievements to trade on were reconciled to losses but confident of victory. Labor, committed to a drastic socialist program, was sure of gains but uncertain of victory. To an anxious world inquiring, 'Stands Britain where she did?' British voters would give an answer..."³⁰

By 1945, there were approximately 33 million men and women in Britain who were registered to vote.³¹ These voters had not voted in a national election in a decade. Also, millions of new voters had become eligible since the Conservative landslide of 1935. In addition, the army vote proved to be a significant factor in the results. This vote, which had traditionally been Conservative, voted Labour. Duff Cooper said that, "To the average British private in the army, the Government was the sergeant major and the sergeant major was the Government."³² Certainly if Cooper's metaphor is accurate then it is little wonder that the

³⁰Time, Foreign News, "The Peoples Choice", July 9, 1945, p. 29.

³¹Ibid, p. 24.

³²Duff Cooper, Old Men Forget, Macmillan, London, 1950, p. 46.

soldiers voted Labour. Another factor was that in 1945 over two-thirds of the army was not traditional military. Instead, the armed forces were made up of young men with "working class" backgrounds from all over Britain, who were committed to the Labour Party.

The American press began to sound a more uncertain note about the election shortly after the votes were cast, but before the results were counted. Newsweek called the final week of campaigning "a magnificent personal triumph (for Churchill), in which the Prime Minister swung around the country traveling over one thousand miles."³³ The press made a great deal of the rowdiness of the British people during the campaign. Churchill, while enjoying the campaign, did have some unpleasant experiences. He was booed and hit by a firecracker at Totenham Bec the day before the balloting. Another embarrassing experience was described by The New York Times:

"An interesting if not particularly significant incident punctuated Prime Minister Churchill's review of British troops in the Treigurten today. As Mr. Churchill and most of the British military and naval leaders in Berlin drove up to the reviewing stand in half tracks a group of British soldiers on the other side of the street set up a loud cheer. The Prime Minister assuming it was for him, half raised his hand in a V sign. When Clement R. Attlee's name however was shouted Mr. Churchill realized that the applause was for the leader of the opposition in the British election, He dropped his hand quickly while Mr. Attlee in a half track behind him smiled and waved acknowledgement."³⁴

³³Newsweek, "Britons Lionize Good Old Winnie", July 9, 1945, p. 56.

³⁴The New York Times, July 22, 1945, p. 1.

By agreement between Churchill, Attlee and King George VI, the election was scheduled for July 5. Due to the war, all voters could not vote on that day. There were a number of polling places in Scotland, Wales and overseas in the armed services that did not vote until as much as two weeks later. So that the results would not be announced in piecemeal form, the date of July 26 was agreed to as the official date for counting the ballots. Also, the conference at Potsdam had already been planned for mid-July. Churchill was anxious to meet with Truman and Stalin as he was to wage a national campaign. Due to the uncertainty of the polling, both Churchill and Attlee went to the conference. Both returned home on July 25 to hear the results of the election and to see which one would be returning to the conference on July 26. About 24 million of the eligible 30 million voters cast their ballots. Neither side was optimistic, although Churchill felt he would be returned with a small majority.³⁵ Privately, however, he was distressed, for the events of the closing days of the campaign had taken a heavy toll. He said later:

"I was myself deeply distressed at the prospect of being a party leader instead of a national leader... Naturally I hoped power would be accorded me to try to make the settlement in Europe, to end the Japanese war, and to bring the soldiers home. At this time I was very tired and physically feeble that I had to be carried upstairs in a chair by the Marines from the

³⁵Winston S. Churchill, Triumph and Tragedy, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1953, p. 597.

cabinet meetings under the annexe. Still I had the world position on a whole in my mind, and I deemed myself to possess knowledge, influence, and even authority which might be of service."³⁶

On July 25, Churchill and Attlee along with the British delegation left the Potsdam Conference and returned to London. As the votes were just beginning to trickle in, Churchill went to bed. He felt tired, but confident of victory. He said, "About nine a.m. I awoke with the terrible feeling that something had gone wrong."³⁷ A group of candidates and their supporters gathered at the office of the Admiralty. Churchill rose, bathed and joined the group. He was greeted with the strong air of despair. Before noon it was learned that Harold Macmillan had been defeated. Later, it was learned that Brenden Bracken had lost, as well as the Prime Minister's son, Randolph Churchill. The Prime Minister pondered the possibilities of a close election. Some have speculated that he may have attempted to remain in office had the results been close. By the afternoon of July 26, it was clear that the Conservatives were going to lose by a landslide.

About seven p.m. Churchill arrived at Buckingham Palace and resigned to the King. Churchill advised the King to send for Attlee, something which he did moments later. About 7:30 p.m. Attlee's car

³⁶Winston S. Churchill, Triumph and Tragedy, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1953, p. 590.

³⁷Ibid, p. 599.

moved onto the palace grounds. In a matter of minutes he had "kissed hands" and accepted the King's charge to form a government. Before night fell, one of the most extraordinary changes in British history had occurred. Attlee, after a series of victory celebrations, began the task of forming his cabinet. Before Churchill left 10 Downing Street that evening, he made a statement for the press which read:

"The decision of the British people has been recorded and the votes counted today. I have therefore laid down the charge which was placed upon me in darker times. I regret that I have not been permitted to finish the work against Japan. For this, however, all plans and preparations have been made and the results may come much quicker than we have hitherto been entitled to expect. Immense responsibilities abroad and at home fall upon the new Government and we must all hope that they will be successful in bearing them."³⁸

The popular vote was Labour - 15,047,378 and Conservatives - 9,018,235. The Labour Party won 393 seats, while the Tories were able to capture only 213 seats. Never in British history had the party in power been so completely repudiated by the voters.

The reaction of The New York Times was typical of the American press. They stated:

"In one of the most stunning election surprises in the history of democracy, Great Britain swung to the left today in a landslide that smothered the Conservatives and put Labour into power with a great majority ... The world which looked to Britain for a guiding

³⁸Winston Churchill, Triumph and Tragedy, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1953, p. 657.

trend, has had its tremendous answer."³⁹

Time Magazine called the result "...the biggest election upset in British history."⁴⁰ The magazine went on to give their own explanation of what the British voters did:

"...they voted for Government by party instead of by personality, a party with a coherent, thoughtout plan instead of a party with an eclectic program. A strong Britain whose competitive position, in a world in which she is no longer No. 1 power, might be buttressed by nationalization... of key industries, a plan of social security, a foreign policy strengthened by its contacts with socialist leaders throughout Europe..."⁴¹

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the electoral results of 1945. One must wonder if Churchill and the Conservatives had been returned to power, would the results of the Potsdam Conference have been different? Churchill was to comment in his memoirs that neither his successor, Mr. Attlee, nor President Truman were truly up-to-date on the issues, and neither proved to be effective in dealing with Stalin. So at a time when the map of Europe was being redrawn, the United States and Britain, the world's democratic powers, had inexperienced men as their leaders. The question must be asked, what would have happened to the Empire had Churchill won? Churchill,

³⁹The New York Times, July 27, 1945, p. 3.

⁴⁰Time, Foreign News, "The Winners", August 6, 1945, p. 38.

⁴¹Ibid, p. 40.

a strong imperialist, fought independence for India all the way to the final vote on the floor of the House of Commons. He was dedicated to keeping the far-flung Empire intact. However, it is hard to conceive that Churchill could have changed the course of history. By 1945, two world wars had made the Empire a political anachronism.

On the domestic front, the Labour Government instituted more social reform than any government since the Campbell-Bannerman administration of 1906. Would the Tories have followed the same path? In spite of their lipservice to reform, the evidence does not indicate that they would have done so. The Attlee Government brought on the National Health Insurance Act and the Education Act which provided for another year of school for children at government expense. The Labour Government was responsible for laws which nationalized the Bank of England, the railroad system, and the steel industry. All these measures would have had little chance of succeeding in a Conservative Government.

The results of the 1945 election are still felt in modern Britain. The socialist welfare state that Britain is known for took a great step forward in the Labour Government of 1945 to 1951. It is not inappropriate to say that the 1945 General Election was the most important referendum in Britain in this century. The election was not simply a popularity poll for Churchill; it went much further than that. It was an electoral message that England had fundamentally changed and that she

would have a different outlook than she had before the war. Today, one can see the election as symbolic of Britains passage from world leadership to the new era of primarily European involvement.

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