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1883 — 1967
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THE NINTH ATTLEE FOUNDATION LECTURE

delivered by

LORD MAYHEW OF WIMBLEDON

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It was pure Attlee - laconic, dismissive, half-humorous, half-waspish - and also proof of Attlee's good political judgment at that time and his well-founded distrust of excitable left-wing intellectuals.

Since I am not a historian and was never a member of Attlee's Cabinet, I have a problem this evening. My ability to add anything substantial on this well-researched subject is very limited indeed. The best I can do, I think, is to recount the occasions - all too few - when I met Attlee on ministerial or personal occasions, and the impression he made on me.

When I was Parliamentary Secretary at the Foreign Office in his government, and in Bevin's absence, I attended some Cabinet and Cabinet Committee meetings when Attlee was in the chair. Like everything else about him, his Chairmanship was non-charismatic. He did not speak often or at length; nor did he sit upright or make eye contact with other members of the Committee, even if he was referring to them personally. My memory is of a small figure, bent forward over his papers, with his right hand doodling and his left hand twisting some of the few remaining strands of hair on his head. In spite of this, he always gave the impression of listening and thinking very hard, and this would become apparent at the end of the discussion when he would sum up accurately and decisively.

If necessary, he could and would deliver rebukes, sometimes sharp. I remember him saying in Cabinet to Arthur Creech-Jones, then Secretary of State for the Colonies, "Secretary of State, you should not have come to Cabinet without first having briefed yourself on that." He had the greatest regard for Lord Addison but this elderly statesman often failed to keep up with the discussion and would interrupt it demanding explanations. I remember Attlee telling him testily that the point he had just raised had been settled only a few minutes before.

I saw most of Attlee when he was Chairman of the India and Burma Committee, of which he had made me a member, explaining that he wanted me, in his words, "to see how things are done." Certainly it could not have been in the hope that I would make any useful contribution. I was quite out of depth, awestruck by the level of the decisions which the Committee had to take - for example, should the Indian sub-continent consist of two nations or one? - and also by the level of discussion, especially between Cripps and Mountbatten, with occasional interventions from Attlee himself. Towards the end of his life someone asked Attlee what he would best be remembered for as Prime Minister. He replied, "I don't know. Perhaps India."

This may be how he deserves to be remembered but it is not, I think, the perception of him today - not in this country at least. However, India did help him very much to become leader

of the Labour Party and subsequently Prime Minister. He had been appointed by Ramsay MacDonald to be the Party's representative on the Simon Commission, which twice visited India and reported in 1928/29. At that time, like MacDonald, Attlee thought British rule was inevitable for the foreseeable future. Perhaps he was helped towards this conclusion by having been educated in what was then easily the most Empire-orientated public school, Haileybury.

In 1930 he believed that the Indians were ready neither for independence nor for the degree of self-government envisaged in the Simon Report. This went too far even for MacDonald, and was wildly at odds with the official policy of the party which favoured early Dominion status.

However, he was by far the best informed party member on the subject of India and was the natural party spokesman during the long debates on the India Act in the mid-30's. His views gradually changed during this period and also during the war when he was, of course, besides Deputy Prime Minister, also Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs. The traumatic developments in India during the war - including the arrest of Ghandi and Nehru - had convinced him by 1945 that India was becoming ungovernable and must be brought to independence without delay. As Prime Minister, he overruled a number of his colleagues in backing Wavell's view - Wavell was Viceroy - that it would be impossible to enforce British rule beyond the

spring of 1948. At the same time, Attlee felt Wavell was not the man to handle the transfer of power, and made his inspired choice of Mountbatten to replace him.

In the early part of 1947 there were three meetings of the India and Burma Committee at which Mountbatten was present. They were, by a long way, the most interesting Committee meetings I have attended. At the first, Mountbatten told us that both sides in India were now prepared to accept Dominion status. He had arrived in England only an hour or two before and this was news to all of us; immensely important news in itself, and also because it was bound to smooth the transfer of power. Attlee said, "This is, of course, our goal." I had the impression that he had become a shade redder in the face and was doodling with unusual intentness, but even then he did not look up at Mountbatten or the rest of us.

At the second meeting, Attlee announced that he had now obtained a pledge that the Tory Party would co-operate in Mountbatten's proposals for the handover. He said that Churchill had given Mountbatten a message from Jinnah positively commanding him to co-operate.

Bringing Churchill along was not the least of Attlee's contributions at this time. There is a popular belief that Churchill was rather contemptuous of Attlee; everyone knows the remark attributed to him: "Attlee? A modest man with plenty to be modest about." But there was, in fact, a good deal of respect between them, based on mutual recognition of each other's integrity and sense of public duty.

I kept, spasmodically, a diary at this time. About one of these meetings I noted, "Among Mountbatten's most striking remarks are, 'There will be bloodshed whatever we do. It is a question of how many gallons of blood.' When a suggestion is made involving some delay, 'I must remind the Committee that while we wait India is blowing up under our feet'. at which everyone murmurs assent."

My diary continues: "The question of altering the King's title from 'Rex Imperatur' to something else came up. 'I wonder if the King will mind,' said the P.M. 'As a matter of fact, I asked him last night when I was dining with him.' replied Mountbatten. 'He doesn't mind a bit, but asked whether it would mean changing his signature, RI, of which he is rather proud. He doesn't want to change that, I don't think.' The P.M. and the Committee agreed that to keep the signature would add to Britain's store of valued historic anomalies."

And then on 3rd June 1947, the Government's proposals on India were announced to the House of Commons. I recorded, "P.M. makes involved statement in House - incomprehensible, inaudible. Churchill replies, despite well-meaning but untimely efforts of our backbenchers to stop him on points of order - they think he is going to try to wreck things. In fact, of course, he backs the scheme, promises no opposition on legislation, and actually ends with a tribute to the P.M. Throughout the whole business he has been public-spirited.

Some of our boys are mystified, and Willie Gallagher speaks for all purblind reactionaries everywhere on the Left by saying that he did not understand a word of the P.M's statement, but that since Churchill supported it, it was probably highly suspect."

I also had some contacts with Attlee over the Government's handling of the Cold War. His judgment of Soviet Communism was consistently sensible. He never suffered - unlike so many members of the Labour Party - from Stalinist illusions or from what might be called the 'Left understands Left' illusion, to which even Bevin gave currency, speaking to a Labour audience.

In the early days after the October Revolution, Attlee supported recognition of the Soviet Union and trade agreements, but always on practical, non-ideological grounds, and that was also his approach to relations with the Soviet Union during the war. In May 1945, he commented to Dalton, "The Russians are behaving in a perfectly bloody way, telling us nothing but setting up puppet governments all over Europe as far West as they can." Possibly he was trying Dalton out. Certainly, soon afterwards he was to surprise everyone by appointing Ernest Bevin and not Dalton as Foreign Secretary. He said to me once, "I thought the situation required a heavy tank like Ernie." This was typical of his good judgment in fitting men to jobs - Bevin as Foreign Secretary, Mountbatten as Viceroy, Nye Bevan as Minister of Health to create the Health Service, Cripps in 1947 as economic supremo. Appropriately enough, the job of Prime Minister was admirably suited to Attlee, and I think he was aware of this.

It is natural to wonder what the result would have been if he had appointed Dalton instead of Bevin to the Foreign Office. Our handling of Palestine and our performance at the United Nations might well have been smoother, but would Dalton have stood up to the pressure of the Left on the Left/Right issues - the military alliance with the United States, German rearmament, Greece, and so on? Here Attlee foresaw correctly that on these battlefields the scope for manoeuvring and skirmishing would be limited, and that a well-armed heavy tank was needed, and he had one close to hand.

In 1947 I came back from the United Nations worried by the complete lack of response from the West to the political warfare being waged there by the Communist delegates. It seemed to be having some effect, particularly in the Third World, so I put up a paper to Bevin arguing that we should set up a secret department in the Foreign Office to conduct a world-wide campaign of anti-Stalinist propaganda, taking the fight to the enemy's camp, attacking the wretched conditions in the Soviet Union, the slave labour camps, and so on. Bevin told me to send a copy to Attlee and then to go and see him.

Attlee was strongly supportive. He agreed that the existence of the department should be kept secret - not so much, I believe, to deny the Russians information, as to avoid trouble in the Parliamentary Labour Party, and he agreed that it should be financed from the secret vote. Above all, however, he was prepared to help in practical ways.

It was very important for the new department - it was called the Information Research Department - that its general lines of propaganda should be given authority. This could best be done in ministerial speeches. Attlee agreed to co-operate and a number of his public statements about Soviet Communism originated in this way. Take, for example, this passage in a broadcast he made on the BBC Overseas Service: "The history of Soviet Russia provides us with a warning - a warning that without political freedom, collectivism can quickly go astray and lead to new forms of injustice and repression. For political freedom is not merely a noble thing in itself, essential for the full development of a human personality - it is also a means of achieving economic rights and social justice, and of preserving these things when they have been won. Where there is no political freedom, privilege and injustice creep back. In Communist Russia, 'privilege for the few' is a growing phenomenon and the gap between the highest and lowest incomes is constantly widening. Soviet Communism pursues a policy which threatens with a new form of imperialism - ideological, economic and strategic - the welfare and way of life of the other countries of Europe."

Today this passage which, as it happens, I wrote myself, may sound rather studied and moderate, but for a Labour Prime Minister in December 1947, it was distinctly outspoken, and it gave authority - and authorisation - to several of the themes which the Information Research Department was to disseminate and exploit. For example, I think it was the first authoritative statement of the concept of Soviet imperialism.

I said that the secrecy of this department, IRD, was not primarily to deny information to the Russians - this was perhaps fortunate. Though not strictly relevant, I cannot resist explaining why. Soon after it was set up, the Minister of State at the Foreign Office, a splendid, patriotic Scotsman, Hector McNeil, entered my office, made some kindly remarks about IRD and said he had someone available who was uniquely qualified for IRD work. I replied that I was now only taking people with exceptional knowledge of Soviet Communism. Who was his candidate? "My personal assistant, Guy Burgess. Just your man."

I interviewed Burgess. He certainly showed a dazzling insight into Communist methods of subversion and propaganda, and I readily took him on. Fortunately, a few months later, my alert private secretary, Norman Reddaway, advised me to look at Burgess's work. I made some enquiries and dismissed Burgess from IRD, minuting on his file, "Burgess is dirty, drunken and idle." However, it never occurred to me that he was a Soviet agent and had joined IRD - this must have been the case - on KGB instructions.

Attlee must have been outraged by the Burgess and MacLean affair, and I am rather glad that, having lost my seat, I was not around when the scandal broke. Attlee took a splendidly robust line with Communists and fellow-travellers, especially when they were members of the Labour Party. At that time, at least, MI5 was a wholly reliable source of information as to who was a secret member or supporter of the C.P., and if they

were Labour M.P's, Attlee had no hesitation about moving their expulsion from the Parliamentary party which, in almost every case, meant the end of their political careers. The Cold War was a field in which the famous Attlee-Bevin partnership operated in particular harmony. But it worked in other fields as well, of course - on Commonwealth questions, or on Europe, or in vain attempts to stand up to the Americans on Palestine. Both were infuriated by the pressure brought on the governmentj by Truman to make major concessions to the Zionists,(especially by allowing the immediate immigration of 100,000 refugees), while at the same time refusing to co-operate in maintaining law and order, a task they themselves were making impossible.

Attlee and Bevin liked each other and complemented each other. Working together, they illustrated at its best the alliance between the political and industrial wings of the Labour Movement, and also between middle-class socialists and the working-class socialists. Their talents complemented each other - on the one side restraint, patience, orderliness, logic; on the other, impetuousness, instinct, brute strength, egotism, charisma. What they had in common, besides courage, was loyalty, and this included particularly loyalty to each other. They knew that to a large extent they depended on each other and could rely on each other.

On 29th July 1947, I noted in my diary, "Long talk with Ernie about the crisis. Several members of the Parliamentary party are gunning for Clem and want Ernie as P.M. - or at least some big Cabinet changes. Ernie says several people were crowding round him last night, urging him to go to to-morrow's Party

meeting etc. He said Nye Bevan was behind it - you could always tell Nye was up to something from his attitude in the Cabinet. I say I think Clem is admirable and should stay. Ernie heartily agrees. "Clem is not spectacular," he says, "but what is the finest Cabinet we've had for 150 years? The 1906 Liberals, in which a group of personalities were kept together as a team by a rather dull, honest fellow, Campbell-Bannerman. Take Clem away and where were you? Who could succeed Clem?, he asked me rhetorically. "Only you," I say. "Me?" he said. "When have I ever done an honest man out of a job?"

And later, on 17th August, I noted, "Ernie again brings up the question of Clem's removal - obviously sounding me out. I repeat that though he could no doubt make himself P.M. if he wished to, my view was that he should let Clem stay as the best means of keeping the Party united. He agrees again - I am sure sincerely. Says Dalton and Cripps came this morning to try to persuade him to oust Clem. "I told them I had never done a man out of his job before." "That alone would not be much of a reason." I said. "The point is, what with Herbert, Bevan and so on, I doubt if you would get a united party." "Yes, I'd probably get a split party. It's all this intriguing I won't do. Dalton, Cripps, all of them. What happened to Lloyd George and Asquith? The public gets to know you're an intriguer." "It's a big decision to take." I said. "Not for me it ain't." he replied, with a huge grin.

When he was writing his autobiography, Attlee sent me his draft chapter on International Affairs and asked for my comments. I had to reply that it seemed to me far too short and matter-of-fact, and not do justice to his achievements. I suggested, among other things, that he should write about his relationship with Bevin - for example, about the difficulty of understanding Bevin's precise meaning when he was pronouncing on a complicated question. Attlee sent a good-humoured reply (hand-written - typically he had no personal secretary at this time) in which he declared that there was only one occasion when he failed to understand what Bevin was saying. He then described - as he often did to others - a meeting he had attended with Bevin, Hugh Dalton and Dai Grenfell. He said Bevin had wound up by declaring, 'We'll leave it all to Yewandeye'. "I didn't know" Attlee wrote, "whether this meant 'you and I', 'you and Dai', 'Hugh and I' or 'Hugh and Dai'.

He ignored all my well-meant suggestions for improving his book and was magnificently unconcerned about its predictable failure. I looked again at this autobiography quite recently. The chapter on Foreign Affairs is 7½ pages long. The references to Palestine occupy 14 lines - lines, it has to be said, of breathtaking banality.

Attlee won loyalty from his colleagues and friends and from the Party because his own loyalty was never in doubt. He was famously loyal to his old school, Haileybury, and told me

cheerfully when appointing me to the Foreign Office that he always enjoyed promoting old Haileyburians. When his Government was formed he wrote, "My young Haileyburians in the House are an able lot. Whiteley selected one for a Whip and Morrison another for a PPS, while I had another for a like purpose, one de Freitas."

In 1940 when he was Deputy Prime Minister, Attlee had invited me to dine with him in his club, the Oxford and Cambridge. I was in uniform, on leave from France, and expected to be questioned about conditions in the British Expeditionary Force and the feelings of the troops. Not at all. As I remember it, we talked most of the time about Haileybury and also about the two tries my brother had scored at Twickenham in the University Match in 1937. On the subject of sport, especially cricket and rugby, Attlee could become positively loquacious, but small talk was beyond him. I can see him now, advancing down a corridor in the House of Commons towards me, almost visibly screwing up the courage needed to wish me good morning.

I did not know until much later that he had once said to a group of junior Ministers, "One more thing. If I pass you in the corridor and don't acknowledge you, remember it's only because I am shy." Surely no statesman has ever shown or felt so little of the glamour of high office. Ernest Bevin felt it and so did Herbert Morrison and, most of all, Dalton. But never Attlee. Being Prime Minister was just a particularly

important and sometimes difficult job. Not the kind of job which should prevent you from travelling by tube, or from talking, eating or dressing in anything but your usual modest manner.

One evening at Chequers there was a rather large and formal dinner - black ties, long dresses and several famous faces. After we had assembled in the hall and been ushered into the dining room, it became apparent as we sat down that someone was missing. Told that this was a young school friend of one of his daughters, Attlee quickly bade us refold our napkins and hurry back to the hall. There we waited for a short while until the girl came downstairs, unsuspecting, and joined us. We then went into dinner again, as though for the first time.

Attlee left office with a high reputation but, unlike many British prime ministers, his reputation has continued rising fairly consistently ever since. This is particularly remarkable when the achievements of his Government - in particular the nationalisations and partnership with the unions, have come under increasing criticism in recent years.

Perhaps an explanation is that the prime ministers who followed Attlee have lacked either his integrity or his modesty or, in one obvious instance, both. It is difficult and rare for a democratic leader to reach the top without driving ambition. Like Truman, who became President because Roosevelt died,

Attlee became and remained Prime Minister not by the use of sharp elbows but because his possible rivals either lost their seats in the 1929 General Election, or disqualified themselves thereafter by mutual rivalry or dislike. So, at very critical moments in their history, Britain and the United States were blessed with leaders of integrity and modesty. May this country one day be blessed again with a leader of Attlee's stature.

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