CLEMENT ATTLEE - PRINCE OF PRIME MINISTERS

A lecture given by the Rt. Hon. the Earl of Longford, K.G., on 15 February 1989 at the Glaziers' Hall, being the seventh annual lecture since the Attlee centenary in 1983.

I have readily accepted Harold Wilson's description of Clem Attlee as "the Prince of Prime Ministers", and I will explain why, as I proceed, but first I must say a few words of personal gratitude.

Again and again, it seems looking back, that Clem Attlee took steps to move me forward, apart from the ordinary role of a prime minister in regard to a younger politician. Perhaps it was because, like Attlee, my father fought at Gallipoli. I was defeated in the General Election of 1945 - I was the only one in my circle of Labour friends not to win a seat. Clem Attlee not only arranged for me to become a peer, but appointed me a Lord-in-Waiting; in other words, a junior member of the government. In that capacity I spoke almost incessantly on behalf of the government's policies in the House of Lords. There were only a handful of Labour peers and, apart from Billy Listowel, no young ministers.

After a year he sent for me and asked me to become Parliamentary Secretary at the Ministry of National Insurance. I should recall that I had been Beveridge's Personal Assistant in the drawing up of the Social Insurance Report. What followed must be regarded as unusual. I was very conscious of an inglorious military record. I walked half-way down Whitehall when I turned back and asked to see the Prime Minister again. I begged him for a post where I could do something for the army; he at once made me Under-Secretary of State for War.

Soon I was promoted to be Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the British Zone of Germany under the Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin. I preached a policy of forgiveness to the Germans that went far beyond the government's intentions. A very different line was officially pursued, and the dismantling of German industry continued. More than once I wrote to the Prime Minister offering my resignation; his reply took this characteristic form: "My dear Frank, I note the point you mention and will see you as soon as possible. Yours ever, Clem." So I continued with an inner sense of shame.

In the following spring he called on me personally in our house in Golders Green where I was laid up with a broken Achilles tendon. He came to the point abruptly: "It's about time you had a department of your own. Harry (Lord) Nathan wants to return to business. What about Civil Aviation?" I muttered something about not deserting Germany on which he made no comment. He muttered something about Chris (Viscount) Addison, the Leader of the Lords, not being able to go on for ever, the indication being that I would be his successor. "So that's that", he said briskly, and set off to return to Downing Street. I introduced him to Mrs. Pope, our housekeeper, and May, her niece. "Morning, Mrs. Pope, morning, May" were his last words as he set off.

I was still much in favour, but there came a sad day when I fell out of it. In agreement with my Department I set aside the findings of an inquiry into a tragic air crash at Prestwick without consulting what he called "senior ministers". I was hauled over the coals for the first time. After the 1950 Election I stayed at Civil Aviation when I had expected promotion.

In summer 1951, however, he sent for me again. "I want you to be First Lord of the Admiralty" he told me. I was staggered. "I feel I am too eccentric", I blurted out. "Don't worry about that", he replied as briskly as ever. "The Admiralty has survived Winston and Brendan Bracken, and will probably survive you." As First Lord of the Admiralty, though not in the Cabinet, I attended meetings of the Defence Committee, as well as occasional meetings of the Cabinet. In the Defence Committee Clem was master in his own house, deferring to no one. In the Cabinet, except where certain issues like Defence and India were concerned, he appeared to work through the so-called senior ministers. Bevin

Thirteen years later Harold Wilson was forming his Cabinet. There was more than one candidate for the leadership of the House of Lords. Harold Wilson told me when offering me the job that he had consulted Clem Attlee; Clem had told him in his wisdom or otherwise that it ought to be me.

I will turn briefly to Clem's achievements which have been well covered in previous lectures. He took over the leadership of the Party from the pacifist, George Lansbury, who had a large following in 1935. He led a united party into support of the war and then into membership of the war-winning Coalition. Churchill had not been slow to recognise his enormous contribution. He led the Party, still united, into the tremendous victory of 1945. He presided over a government which, in my eyes-prejudiced if you like, did more to improve the lot of the poor than any British government, before or since. He played a supreme part in the liberation of India which led on, as we know, to the extraordinary phenomenon of the new Commonwealth.

He and Ernest Bevin between them took the initiative in the formation of the Atlantic Pact and in the establishment of a foreign policy which has been pursued by all governments since that time. What may be controversial, though in my eyes he did the right thing, he took the responsibility with a small group of ministers for building Britain's nuclear deterrent.

Such achievements can be recorded on paper. What cannot really be described is the moral influence he exerted through the Labour Party and throughout the country in the twenty years he was Leader of the Party. I have described him elsewhere as an ethical giant and I want to spend most of the rest of my time on considering him in that capacity.

In a book I wrote some years ago called Eleven at Number Ten I have paid tribute to the integrity of all recent Prime Ministers. I have applied to them what was said about a group of earlier leaders. The question is qua mente, and these men all had noble ideals, but I said frankly that I placed Attlee on a pedestal beyond the rest. They were all brave men and so was he, as he proved during all those years of front-line service during the 1914-1918 war. I would not like to suggest that any of them were selfish people, but his unselfishness was a strong, life-long characteristic.

Kenneth Harris in that splendid biography brings out most vividly his admiration for the unselfishness of many poor, uneducated, uncultured boys in the East End. I can only quote one extract in a letter Attlee wrote at this time; "I have been particularly struck by the many instances of unselfishness shown by the (elder) boys; for instance, a corporal of the Band, which at that time contained so many seniors that promotion was blocked, offered to resign his much-coveted stripes in order to give another boy who had been working well a chance of promotion."

The German Prince von Bulow once enunciated the dictum :"Real statesmen are governed by two motives only: love of country and love of power". Can a really unselfish man become Prime Minister? He can, because Attlee did that very thing, and so did another unselfish man, Lord Home. But in the case of Attlee accident figures largely, though it usually plays some part in all premierships. Attlee would never have fought his way to the top; it needed the defeat of the leading personalities in 1931 to put him there.

Once there, however, he was immovable in spite of a number of very unattrative intrigues among some of his top colleagues. He would no more have thought of abandoning his post in No.10 Downing Street than of deserting from the front-line in the war. When he was in the House of Lords he was old and frail. We accorded him the top seat below the gangway on the ministerial side in the first years of the Wilson government. On one occasion he was late. When he came in he found his usual position occupied by a bulky colleague. Attlee simply stood in front of him without saying a word until the colleague moved along. Clem Attlee felt a solemn responsibility to defend not his personal rights but those of his position as an ex-Prime Minister.

Which brings me to his other, still more striking, virtue - his humility. Tnere was an occasion after a debate in the House of Lords when I suggested that he and Vi should join Elizabeth and me for dinner. After a rather flurried conversation with Vi, Clem said "No,it's our turn. You must be our guests." There was a pause, and then he added, "but I don't know any restaurants". I chose one that I hoped was neither too expensive nor too cheap, the Queen's Restaurant (now defunct) just outside Sloane Square. We had a delightful time together, but another moment of embarrassment occurred when it came to paying the bill. Clem said to me in a low voice, "They don't know me here. They wouldn't take my cheque." It was before the time of credit cards, but I am sure that like myself he would not have possessed one. It should be realised that he had recently been Prime Minister, never the less he was absolutely genuine in believing that this little restaurant would not cash his cheque. I used to go there quite a lot. I therefore gave them my cheque and Clem Attlee gave me his.

He was, as I see it, determined to see himself as in no way different from the ordinary man. He had lived on equal terms with the very poor in Stepney and under conditions of extreme danger with men of all social classes in the war. He was determined not to become inflated with his national importance. In my eyes, this was all intimately connected with his profound socialist beliefs that all human beings are of equal significance.

A Christian would like to add "of equal significance in the sight of God", but Christians have to be very careful here. Kenneth Harris, in a famous exchange, asked Clem Attlee whether he was a Christian, and got the reply:

A. Believe in the ethics of Cnristianity. Can't believe the mumbo-jumbo.

H. Would you say you are an agnostic?

A. I don't know.

H. Is there an after-life, do you think?

A.Possibly.

But Christians are entitled to point to the powerful Christian influences brought to bear through his family on his formation. As I read Kenneth Harris I get the feeling that Attlee's brother Tom, who introduced him to the East End, was the most powerful single influence in his life. Tom was a Christian Socialist who went to prison in the First World War for his beliefs. Clem went through heavy fighting but they remained devoted to each other until Tom's death many years later.

While on the subject of Clem's humility, I must quoted one other passage from Kenneth Harris dealing with the last years in the Lords. "Nearly every morning when the House of Lords was in session Vi drove him to Great Missenden station. He boarded the train "well up to the front to try to get a corner seat" and travelled in a third-class compartment to Baker Street, then to Westminster on the Metropolitan Line. In his battered little brown case were usually a few copies of Hansard, two spare pipes, a two-ounce tin of cut Golden Bar - Attlee always filled his pipe from the tin, never from a pouch - and a couple of detective paperbacks. Sometimes he would do <u>The Times</u> crossword. Occasionally he was recognised, but very rarely." A letter to Tom on 8 April 1956 runs: "I have to take part in a ceremony in June at Windsor. (This was to be enrolled as a Knight of the Garter.) Rosebery has kindly offered me the loan of his father's robes for the occasion." The prospect inspired him to write the limerick:

Few thought he was even a starter
There were many who thought themselves smarter
But he ended PM
CH and OM
An earl, and a knight of the garter.

We must all realise that his was a totally genuine humility. ...

colleagues, defence and India, for example. But although I was not a member of the Cabinet I was able to observe at the time, and a hundred others have written about it since, that his method of government was for the most part one of delegation. There is no doubt that once Bevin and Cripps had collapsed and died, this method was imperilled. Morrison and Dalton were hardly reliable supports. I personally believe that he would have presided with much success over the next generation of Socialists - Hugh Gaitskell, Harold Wilson and Douglas Jay among them and, of course, there was no one for whom he had a higher regard than Arthur Bottomley. However, that could not happen in the nature of things. His time had come and he only hung on until 1955 to make sure that someone he approved of, like High Gaitskell, could succeed him.

I saw a great deal of him in his last years in the Lords. He was, of course, vastly more esteemed than I was, and every now and then, as over Suez, he made brilliant, telling interventions. But as he once said to me when I suggested that he, rather than I, should take the lead in some matter: "I'm dead, you're alive! " His humility was transcendent to the end.

When I was able to provide a government car to take him and myself to the funeral of Lord Alexander, he alone wore a top hat. "I'm a Victorian" he said, in a style that he himself described as "laconic". I was sorry that he was so opposed to the European idea. It went hand-in-hand with his inextinguisnable dislike of the Germans. When I asked him to become a patron of the Anglo-German Association, of which I was Chairman, he hesitated for a moment, not wishing to be unkind, and then said, " I think that I ought to tell you that I cant stand the Germans. Vi and I once had a German maid we liked very much, but she was an exception."

When I think of all the times when I, as Minister for Germany, pleaded the cause of her stricken people, I marvel at his restraint in never letting me know what he was really feeling about them.

The sublime inspiration of his last years was his devotion to the cause of world government. IN his eyes this was the logical continuation of the international aspirations of Labour people for half a century. He had no doubts about the useful merits of the aim, though he was far too realistic to assume that it was likely to be achieved in his lifetime.

Clem Attlee, then, was a brave, unselfish and humble man. A thorough gentleman, a shrewd political tactician, a laconic wit, under-estimated in that regard until late in the day. In what was he also a socialist? Vi Attlee said to him, near the end of his life, "You were never really a socialist, were you, Clem?" Attlee puffed at his pipe. "Well, not a rabid one," she ended triumphantly. Again he made no comment. Which leaves the matter open.

One of the most fascinating parts of Kenneth Harris' book is that which deals with his conversion to socialism through his life in the East End. His mother heard, with resignation, the news of what Harris calls "his joining the party of the militant working class". His father outwardly remained tolerant but confided to one of his sons "I wish I were a younger man. I'd argue it out with him and knock all that nonsense out of his head."

But what was the real content of that nonsense, then and later? In one sense he was the perfect public school socialist. It happens that the week before last I was addressing the R.H.Tawney Society at Rugby. Rugby was the school not only of Tawney, the high priest of democratic socialism, but also of William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury with strong socialist leanings. Substitute Haileybury for Rugby, and you find much in common between Tawney, Temple and Attlee, though many differences as well.

It was said in a Times leader of Erskine Childers on the morning after he was executed for taking part in the Irish Civil War on the Republican side that "throughout the horrors and convulsions of a revolution, he preserved the highest standards

Labour Party by his retention of conservative habits and attitudes, in addition to his unassailable war record. When he had gone to live among the very poor, he could still take quite seriously the right way to drink a glass of claret. He wore the only top hat at Albert Alexander's funeral. Outside his family he was never so happy as when he was watching cricket at Lords. And yet the years living on terms of complete equality with the working men and women of the East End gave him an understanding of them and a stature in their eyes which he retained all his life. There, neither Tawney nor Temple nor dedicated Wykehamists like Hugh Gaitskell, could match him. It was an indestructible element in the confidence that he inspired among the working class.

But one has still not answered the question, what did socialism mean to him? The equality of man certainly, the brotherhood of man just as surely, but something else beyond. He dreamed of a world in which the supreme motivation was service not self, the ideal that so many others derived from Tawney's Acquisitive Society. Would he be grievously disappointed if he returned today and found the opposite motivation being preached with much success at the polls?

I do not presume to say. His realism would, I think, have led him to note with regret a certain delay on the Labour side in developing and adapting to new conditions the socialism that had been his own inspiration. But that would not lead him to conclude - why should it - that his inspiration had been at fault. He would consider, as I do, that it brought enormous benefits in his time. One can be sure that if he returned today he would place all his energies at the disposal of younger leaders. He would accept any task he was called on to perform, whether in high office or unobtrusively in the ranks, marching with the men or, for that matter the women. Whatever his achievements as they are reckoned in the history books, he left the example of a good life, of purity in action which I hope and believe will never be forgotten.