KENNETH HARRIS

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ATTLEE: CHARACTER AND POLITICS

Chairman, my Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen: I am sure that if Clem Attlee were here tonight the first thing he would like to hear would be congratulations to Arthur Bottomley on his elevation to the house of Lords - if elevation for Arthur is possible - not a reference to your physique, Arthur, but to your character which has made you so many friends and admirers and must make the Foundation so proud to have you as its head. It is particularly felicitious to have a man of your integrity in the chair tonight when my task is to talk for twenty-five minutes or so about character and politics, displayed and expressed by Clem Attlee to a degree not equalled by any Prime Minister of whom we have a comparable accumulation of historical knowledge.

There is a second coincidence which I find very gratifying, particularly in view of the topic I am to speak about, and that this the second Attlee Foundation Memorial Lecture follows the one given by Douglas Jay. Those of us who wish these annual tributes to continue are under a special debt to Douglas, since it was because his lecture a year ago

did such monumental service to the memory of Attlee as a good Prime Minister, not only as a great Prime Minister, a Prime Minister of the highest character, as well as of the highest skill, that the centenary lecture begat this series of which my own is number two. Douglas has always held that Attlee was a very strong Prime Minister - a view now common, but not when Douglas first declared it - and that the strength came mainly not from his undoubted skills but from his character. Douglas told me for the biography, "The atmosphere in Number 10 was moral." And Douglas's own memoirs contain valuable and original testimony to that assention. Frank Longford, too, long before the view became fashionable declared, decades ago, that Attlee was not just a chairman of his government but its leader, and strong one, and that his strength came from his character. It was 25 years ago when Frank made the remark, quoted in my biography, "Attlee was the most ethical of our Prime Ministers with the possible exception of Gladstone."

One of the most important products of a historical biography if it is fortunate enough to obtain the attention of eminent reviewers, distinguished former political leaders and learned academics - as mine did - is to provide an opportunity for an up-to-date, possibly a revised assessment, of the subject of the book. What impressed me most about the reviews of the Attlee biography was

the degree to which the reviewers focussed, homed in, on Attlee's character, or, more exactly, on the contribution his irreproachable character made to his power as a Prime Minister, and the achievements of his administration, on which owed so much to his personal authority. It was noticeable that most of them did not see his character as something unrelated to his political authority, to which also they paid ample tribute. They did not see him as a very good Prime Minister who happened to be also a very good man; they saw his power as being in great part the product of his character. The six years of change which began in 1945 were possibly unprecedented in our history. It is difficult to conceive of that massive programme of social and economic change - not to mention India, and the conversion of the Labour Party into one fit to government - being established by a man <u>with</u> Attlee's skills but without his character. That, though they also appreciate and cite his political skills, is one of the messages sent out most clearly by the eminent reviewers of the Attlee biography. More of that later.

Nobody conveyed to me as much of a sense of the relation between Attlee's authority and Attlee's character, and the political importance of that authority as the late Lord Helsby. Laurence Helsby, whom I only talked to once, but on that occasion for four hours, wanted to remain un-named - a civil servant's convention, and one which I respected. Now

that he has been dead for some years I ought to name him as the source of many enlightening remarks in my biography, particularly since some of these observations and insights, in the absence of information to the contrary, have been attributed to other now deceased Secretaries to the Cabinet and other Senior civil servants. Helsby was Attlee's Principal Private Secretary in the years 1947 to 1950. Helsby thereafter rose in the civil service. When he retired he had been Joint Permanent Secretary to the Treasury and Head of the Home Civil Service 1963-1968. He had served four Prime Ministers very closely. In the book I quote Laurence Helsby, without attribution for the reasons I have stated, as saying that his civil servants found Attlee "quite oddly apolitical." "I never had the feeling with him that I have had with other Prime Ministers," Helsby said, "that while they felt they must do what was good for the country, they must never be expected to shut their eyes to what was good for the party." Prime Ministers, he said, are very reluctant to discipline their ministerial colleagues, either at Cabinet level or below; this partly, and commendably, due to loyalty, affection, comradeship; but also often, to a greater or lesser degree, a fear of the consequences - resentment inside the party, bad publicity outside the party. To this fear, said Helsby, Attlee seemed immune. If members of the government or powerful figures outside the government, like Field Marshal Montgomery, needed in Attlee's view to be

disciplined, then they were disciplined. And quickly. There is a quite well-known story of the junior minister - not all that junior a minister - whose work had not met with Attlee's satisfaction. This junior minister was not lacking in self confidence, and on sitting down opposite Attlee in the Cabinet Room asked, "What can I do for you Prime Minister?" "I want your job." "But why, Prime Minister?" "Afraid you are not up to it." The interview was over. Many years after that event I asked Lord Attlee if he would tell me the name of the minister concerned because the story, sometimes with malice, was to be heard told of more than one person. Attlee told me the name of the person concerned, and asked me in return not to cite that name since the individual was still alive. "And," I asked, "is the story I have told you exactly true?" And he answered, with great sadness, "Afraid it is."

This is the voice, the sad voice, of the man of character. Sad that he has had to act so positively, full of regret that in the course of doing his duty he has had to inflict pain. But with no inhibition at the time, and no apology in retrospect. Sadness, yes, but also self confidence. No question of "You see, I had to do it because ..... I wish I had been able to avoid it, but, you see ....." None of that. Sadness, and the self confidence of a man who thought it was his duty to do right.

The only area of high policy in which Attlee's character, in the sense of which I have been speaking of it tonight, a dynamic political force generated by high personal rectitude, might be questioned is that in which the fateful decision was taken that Britain would manufacture her own nuclear bomb - the independent deterrent. As I have recorded in the biography there is no doubt in my mind that Attlee knew exactly what he was doing when he finally authorise the bomb, and lost no sleep over it. But whether he displayed the qualities of character I have referred to earlier in his handling of the long and complex series of events which, over several years of his government, preceded that decision is another matter. Margaret Gowing, Professor of the History of Science at the University of Oxford, who is the official historian of the British Government's policy on nuclear energy, in Volume II of her monumental history of the subject has given us a description of those events which does not project an image of a Prime Minister in control of what was going on from start to finish. Professor Gowing who prevented me from perpetuating some errors and confusions in the first impression of the book is here tonight, alas, still inhibited by her commitment to oaths of official secrecy. May be it will never be possible to hear from her how Attlee's handling of the nuclear weapons issue relates to the estimate of him as a great and positive Prime Minister.

Whatever is to be said, or conjectured about Attlee's handling of what now, and it is only fair to emphasise that word now it may not have looked so at the time - the nuclear issue - there is no doubt that in the running of the country's other major problems, Attlee took a very strong grip on his administration and impressed his character upon its conduct of affairs. What Helsby told me is throughout in principle corroborated by Lord Bridges, Lord Normanbrook, and Sir Leslie Rowan, and by other distinguished civil servants who I shall not name because they are still alive, I quote Helsby - "Attlee as Prime Minister was orderly, regular, efficient and methodical to a degree that put him in a different class from any of the Prime Ministers who followed him ..... Attlee's style and method produced a definite technique of government." In Helsby's summing up: "The country was never so well governed, in this technical sense, in living memory as it was under Attlee." Based on that, and on the informed opinions of other distinguished civil servants, and academics, I added the comment that "the monument to Attlee's efficiency was the massive unprecedented amount of legislation enacted between 1945 and 1951, the fact that the whole of the Labour Party's programme was put on the statute book, and the degree to which the body of new law has stood the test of time without the need for major overhaul."

Let me comment on that judgement: "without the need for major overhaul." Machinery is sometimes badly designed and models following the prototype have to be modified. Parts wear out and have to be replaced. Machinery in good working order needs, from time to time to be retuned. Now and again a major overhaul is necessary - the oil has to be drained from the sump, the timing has to be re-set. This is quite different from removing the machinery or large parts of it all-together as a result of the view that the machinery is useless, dangerous, or too expensive to run any more. Mrs. Thatcher's administrations have not been carrying out a major overhaul of the legislation which the Attlee government bequeathed. Peter Hennessy wrote in the Economist, 24 September, 1982: "..... Mrs. Thatcher sees her task as replacing the Attlean consensus which left Britain with low industrial productivity, resource-hungry State concerns and a Welfare system that discourages thrift and breeds bureaucracy. She says that it will take two parliaments to break that mould, and is privately uncertain whether even she can pull it off ..... Attlee left an immensely robust set of statutes." What Mrs. Thatcher is trying to do is not do a major overhaul. She wants to scrap the machinery.

To return to Attlee's character and its effect on his administration: when I was wondering how I could avoid declaiming this,

and somehow demonstrate it I had the great good fortune to find myself in Paris as a member of a panel organised by the Franco-British Council in cooperation with the Sorbonne and French Political Science Association to discuss the record of the British Government between 1945 and 1951, with particular reference to the setting up of the Welfare State. George Jones, now Professor of Government at the London School of Economics, and one-time labourer in the vineyard of the Cabinet Office, was there, and at one point he said that nobody could understand what had happened between 1945 and 1951 unless they understood with what strength of character Attlee ran his government and the best way of arriving at that understanding was to read Attlee's Prime Minister's minutes for that period. Profiting by George's wisdom, I made a random selection of the Prime Minister's minutes which has appeared as an appendix in the book. These minutes speak for themselves. Or, rather, they speak for Attlee, for his character and its relation to his authority as no biographer could. Of some minutes which with many other memoranda and despatches in the Cabinet Papers demolish the view that in foreign policy Attlee simply did what Ernest Bevin advised him to do. I shall speak on this later. Just for the moment, two very short ones. It used to be said that Attlee did not give praise to anybody: here is a one-liner to Harold Wilson on his return from his critically important trade mission to Moscow in December 1947: "I was very glad to

read your telegram to the Chancellor. Well done!" And then, next to it, as it happens: "To the Parliamentary Secretary, Minister of Civil Aviation: Your use of the word 'brats' was most unfortunate. I propose to reply to your letter. Mr. Lingren informed me that the word to which you have called my attention was used by him in the heat of the moment and that he regrets its use."

Nothing better, if as well, testifies to the character of a Prime Minister than the way he runs his Cabinet, something which is different from how he runs his administration and leads his party, not only because the Cabinet is the engine of government but because in effect the Prime Minister is dealing face to face with a handful of the most influential - and usually the most competitive and ambitious - men in his party. Some Prime Ministers will in public declare their conception of how a Cabinet should be run, but will in fact run it, if run is the right word, differently from that - the degree of discrepancy being a useful standard for the assessment of a Prime Minister's character. Mrs. Thatcher in a much quoted statement she made in an interview for The Observer, in 1979 stated quite clearly how if she became Prime Minister she would run her Cabinet, and she has run her Cabinet in that way. I am not surprised, since whatever one thinks of her policies, she, like Attlee, is a person of great character. She said in 1979: "If you're going to do the things you

want to do - and I'm only in politics to do things - you've got to have a togetherness and a unity in your Cabinet ..... We've got to go in an agreed and clear direction. As Prime Minister I couldn't waste time having any internal arguments." Her views about Cabinet-Making and Cabinet-Management happen to resemble those stated by Attlee for The Observer in 1964. He said: "It is essential for the Cabinet to move on, leaving in its wake a trail of clear, crisp, uncompromising decisions. This is what government is about. And the challenge to democracy is how to get it done quickly." His view was even more pungently expressed by what he wrote in a treatise on government in the early '30s : "The Cabinet is there primarily to act." When after the Cabinet had decided to nationalise the railways, an unhappy Cabinet Minister sent word to Attlee that the Cabinet should "reconsider its proposals", Attlee terminated the correspondence with one minute: "The Cabinet does not propose: it decides."

For many years after Attlee gave up the leadership of the Labour Party in 1955 nothing did less service to Attlee's reputation, and to the historical truth, than the legend that he would do nothing in the field of foreign policy unless he had the support of Ernest Bevin, or the other legend that he left foreign policy entirely to that remarkable man. That legend is no more. It could have been demolished decades ago had

such Cabinet papers been available as the memorandum Attlee wrote to Bevin, 5 January 1947, expressing radical criticism of his whole Middle East policy and describing the views of the Chiefs of Staff on which Bevin's policy was based, as "a strategy of despair": and again, his memorandum to the Cabinet on the future of the Italian colonies, 1 December 1945, when Attlee refused to accept the far reaching recommendations of Bevin and the Chiefs of Staff, argued against them in Cabinet, and carried the Cabinet with him. What was left of the nonsense that Attlee only did in Foreign Policy what Bevin wanted done has finally been dissipated by my friend (and mentor) Allan Bullock in the tremendous Volume III of his magnificent life of Ernest Bevin, where there is ample evidence of Bevin's virtue and abilities, but also of the fact that Attlee ran the government, and was in charge of the government's foreign policy. In no field of foreign affairs did Attlee more assert himself over Bevin than India. Bevin was opposed to withdrawal from India, and particularly to the announcement that we will withdraw on a fixed date. In a private letter to Attlee, 1 January 1947, he said, "I am against fixing a date ..... We appear to be trying nothing but to scuttle out of it ..... and I am convinced that if you do that our Party will lose irrevocably when the public becomes aware of the policy of the Cabinet at this moment." Attlee replied patiently, meeting all his points, and ending with a short paragraph: "If you disagree with what is proposed, you must offer a practical alternative. I fail to find one in your letter."

Attlee's greatest personal contribution to the history of India could be said to be the emancipation of India while retaining her within the Commonwealth. The minutes of the Cabinet, and of the Cabinet sub-committee on which Attlee chaired, not only illustrate the grip Attlee had on India policy but the character he brought to government. Lord Listowel, Secretary of State for India, April to August 1947, who is here tonight, did Attlee, the post-war Labour Government and historical truth a valuable, indeed much-needed service, when in 1978 he wrote a very powerful and highly authoritative paper entitled "The Whitehall Dimension of the Transfer of Power," pointing out that until then, when the relevant Cabinet papers could be published, what we knew of India had "almost all emanated from authors who had either served in the Government of India, or in the entourage of Lord Mountbatten, or had derived their information from his writings and recollections." Lord Listowel overnight redressed the balance. There is no more important part of what the Attlee Government did with India than the decision to impose a deadline, a fixed date to be announced publicly, on which the British Raj would terminate. In spite of much that had been claimed to the contrary, this was Attlee's decision. All the evidence is <u>for</u> that: we have no evidence <u>against</u> that. We have his word on it - not only recorded for me. It was a decision entirely in keeping with his character, his style of government. Helsby told me that in the years 1945 and 1946,

before Lord Listowel became Secretary, Attlee had been his own Secretary of State for India. While in other areas of policy he had delegated most of the letters despatches and telegrams to his ministers and civil servants, he had drafted all the key India documents in his own hand - indeed I have seen a number of them. It is one thing to have ideas, another to construct a policy, and another to administrate. The administrator must be able to make decisions and determine when the final Yes or No shall be pronounced and, if challenged, say why.

Whether we approve or disapprove of the introduction of the Welfare State we cannot deny that the programme of legislation required to bring it about was so massive and so radical that a tremendous feat of management was required in order to bring it about. I cannot believe that any of the other half-a-dozen or so of the Labour Party leaders could have brought it about. There were Bevin, Bevan, Morrison, Cripps and Dalton. Ernest Bevin had immense virtues, but he was aggressive, self-centred and jealous, and into the bargain found it difficult to work with many politicians because they knew he despised them. Aneurin Bevan, gifted, and much admired by Attlee, was generally thought to be brilliant, but unpredictable, unstable, and occasionally explosively contumacious. Morrison was much distrusted because he was thought to be ambitious, an intriguer, sometimes disloyal. Cripps was respected for

his morality, his idealism, his altruism, but much criticised for his lack of practical political nous - and he was no administrator - "His idea of administration," Helsby told me, "was to get up every morning at four am and write reams of stuff longhand in red ink." Dalton: admirable in many ways, but indiscreet, exhibitionistic, mischievous - just read his diaries - he would not have been thought reliable even if he had not ruined his career when in 1947, as Chancellor of the Exchequer he leaked a budget secret - admittedly in about as harmless a way imaginable. A few attempts in the period 1945-1951 to replace Attlee in leadership were shortlived, and failed because these five men had two things in common: they all distrusted each other and each of them trusted Attlee. The Welfare State came about because Attlee was able, with great dificulty, to keep a team of restless prima donnas in harness together, his strength based on their trust in him, on that self-control and infesting fortitude and that ability to live silently and patiently on his own which is one of the signs of character.

Much of Attlee's moral authority came from his record, and no part of his record was more admired by his peers than those motives which led him to a course of action in his youth which led him from an East End Boy's Club to Downing Street. The reason for which men and women decide to play a part in public life, or as we say, go into politics,

are varied and, ultimately, arcane. In Attlee's case the facts tell their own story. One night in October 1905 he recorded: "an event occurred which was destined to alter the whole course of my life." At the age of 22, when he had embarked upon what he and others thought would be a satisfying and remunerative career, somewhat unwillingly accepting the invitation from his younger brother, Laurence, he went down to the Haileybury Club in Stepney, financed by his old school, to see, as he drily put it fifty years later "if the angels were wasting our parents' money." We knew what happened. He decided to help in the Club, lived in, and became its manager. He saw poverty and suffering outside the Club. He came to the conclusion that it could not be dealt with by charity, by ameliorative activities, but only by political change. He joined the I L P and became a member of the local council. Much of the political skill which he displayed as Prime Minister, much of the experience he drew upon, came to him from his years spent in local government. Local government is a good school, not only for skills but for character. The House of Commons very much reflects the party system and adversary politics. There is the government side of the House, there is the opposition side. Though much good work is done in committees, some would say that the characteristic work of the House, the most characteristic function of the House, is in debate, in dialetic, the systematic refusal to agree. Local government is also about power, it is partisan, and

there are interests which clash. But local government has other features. It attracts people, as it did Attlee, who are more interested in improving the lot of their neighbours, than of becoming actors on a national stage. Local government is relatively free of rhetoric, histrionics, ideology and exhibitionism, and of other features which can be a part of any form of public life. Attlee thought well of the members of parliament he saw around him in the last decade of his life. He thought the standard set and exemplified by MPs of all parties was higher than it was when he first entered the House in 1922. I could not swear that he would say the same today. Even when praising the character of the House in 1960 he expressed a regret: that in the 50s and 60s too many young people conceived the idea to go to the House of Commons direct without wishing for experience in local government. The excitement of sharing in power at the top, with the House of Commons as their stage, he used to observe wistfully, seemed to mean more to them than the opportunities to be more effective in the public service which local government could afford. Certainly, his beginnings in the process through which he one day became Prime Minister were humble, obscure, unexhibitionistic, unexpectant, and, in view of his shyness, somewhat painful. Perhaps more than anything that was the condition which made him the great Prime Minister that he was.

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